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DANGEROUS CATSPA W

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BY

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CHAPTER I.

ON the last day of Trinity Term, Reuben Gale, a highly respectable tool manufacturer, resident in Holborn, was tried at the Old Bailey on a charge of burglary and assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm. The case excited considerable interest, and the court was crowded. The air was charged with grit and oil, and the judge, the counsel, the jury, the ushers, the warders, and the public were one and all in a contradictory condition of being weighed down with languor and stimulated by the mystery of the case.

The prisoner was decidedly unlike a burglar to look at. It was easy to fancy him behind his counter, rubbing his hands, with ingratiatory welcoming inquiry,—‘What can I do for you to-day, sir?’ It was not difficult to picture him at a vestry meeting or in the bosom of his family.

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But it was positively hard for the mind to image the man on a desperate and criminal midnight enterprise. He was about the middle height, of spare, sinewy build, and was attired in spotless black, a little too liberal in cut, and in irreproachable linen. His dark hair was getting to be iron grey, and the scrupulously trimmed little bit of whisker on each cheek was almost white. He had largish brown eyes, whose chief expression was of a mild and observant alacrity; and his hair, which was carefully brushed and oiled, was cut rather close to the head, and parted in the middle. He wore round his neck a pair of folding glasses, which he did not seem to use, and in his right hand he held a large white handkerchief, rolled into a ball the size of an orange. He mopped his face with this at intervals, but gave no other sign of perturbation. For the matter of that, scores of people who had no personal interest in the case were mopping their faces in the sweltering heat as if their lives depended on it.

Mr. Wyncott Esden, counsel for the defence, addressed the jury in a speech of rare lucidity and persuasiveness. He was not loud, as so many Old Bailey barristers are. He was calm, argumentative, confidential. He took each gentleman of the jury as it were by the button-

hole, and argued the case with an excellent conviction. His tone and manner conveyed a flattery so intimate that the jury could not but feel the wiser and the better for it. He made his argument as clear as glass, and a child could have seen through it from beginning to end with perfect comprehension. The barrister's aspect helped his cause, as a prepossessing personal appearance always gives an advantage to an orator. He had large and well-cut features and large grey eyes, infinitely sly and friendly. A physiognomist would have doubted him at sight, but he would have been a hard-hearted physiognomist indeed who would have continued long in doubt. Anything more frank, engaging, and confident than his manner it would be difficult to fancy. He was sure of winning you to his view of things—he was positive that he was right, and his manner indicated so complete an apprehension of his hearer's high intelligence that to discredit his argument seemed to do oneself a wrong. He ~~knew~~—so that cordial and persuasive manner seemed to say—no man knew better, how impossible it was to hoodwink a person of *your* intense acuteness. It was of no use in the world—his very attitude confessed it—to try to humbug *you*! Come, now, let us have the cards on the table. Let us argue the

matter. Here are the known facts. Here are the conclusions to which your trained logical faculty has already carried you. It is almost absurd to talk to you in this way, because you know these things as well as I do, and probably a little better. Still, for the satisfaction of outside stupid people, they have to be stated. We thirteen clever fellows have made up our minds long ago that the innocent person in the dock is the victim of some capricious conspiracy of circumstance. We are going to give him a friendly hand together, and help him through.

The court was so crammed, that a number of people had taken up a tentative position on the platform of the bench itself, and these, egged on by listeners less favourably placed, had encroached more and more, until the very functionary who guarded the judge's left was hustled by the more advanced of them. They were cleared away at intervals, and came back as unconquerable as flies.

Any student of character regarding this group upon the platform would have been likely to single out one face for observation. It was the face of a man in early middle age, very calm, resolute, and ready. The man, though jovial and at first sight commonplace enough, had a look of being unsurprisable, and not to be taken

at advantage. He wore a scarf and scarf-pin in execrable taste, and held aloft in a gloved hand a silk hat, polished like a mirror. The head of the pin was a reproduction in miniature of a fifty-pound Bank of England note, a quarter the size of a square on a Staunton chess-board. The wearer of this shameless ornament was Joseph Prickett, a member of the Metropolitan Detective Force, a man fast climbing into fame. He had driven into this Old-Bailey corner the respectable citizen now under trial, and had the natural anxiety to secure his quarry which animates sportsmen of all classes.

That intimate and persuasive discourse of Mr. Wyncott Esden's coming to an end, the judge took up the ball, and kept it rolling. He was extremely complimentary to the defending counsel, and said several things which were agreeable to that gentleman's ears and understanding. But his summing-up, though it had an elaborate air of impartiality, went dead against the prisoner. Prickett, who had gone doubtful, like a connoisseur in wine who is puzzled to class an unknown vintage, brightened. The prisoner's demeanour underwent little change, but he ceased to mop his face with the rolled-up handkerchief, and, clipping it tightly in both hands, leaned his arms upon the rail of

and scrutinised the faces of the jury. The measured murmur of the judge's voice increased the somnolent influence of the close air and heat, and when the gentlemen of the jury were dismissed to their deliberations a languid dullness settled upon everybody present. The jury withdrew, the judge retired to his own apartment, and the prisoner sat down, half hidden behind the dock railing. Faint noises reached the hall of justice from the street and from adjoining corridors. The dusk began to fall. Murmurs of freedom and the outer air touched the prisoner's ear, and once or twice so pricked him that he turned to listen. In the gallery there was a subdued buzz of voices, and one voice said, 'Fifteen years,' with an argumentative snappishness. The prisoner turned to look in the direction of the speaker, and, hot as it was, wiped a cold sweat from his forehead and his hands.

An old *habitué* of the court, a man in seedy black, with a white wisp of necktie and a flavour of rum, stood near to Prickett. He was respectfully certain of his own opinion, but wanted authority to clinch it.

'He'll get ten years at least, don't you think, sir? You see,' with the sort of shuddering relish with which he took his rum hot of a

winter evening, 'it's burglary with violence, Mr. Prickett. It wasn't that far off from being murder. It was quite a meracle the man recovered.'

'You'll know all about it in half an hour,' Prickett answered. 'There's no saying what a clever counsel mayn't do for a fellow. That chap'—indicating Mr. Wyncott Esden with a sideway nod—'is just as deep as Garrick. He's got a tongue as would coax a bird from the bough.'

A movement, almost as he spoke, foretold the return of the jury. An officer of the court slid to the door leading to the judge's apartments, and threw it open. A minute later his lordship and the jury were seated, and the prisoner was on his feet again, searching their faces in the gathering darkness. Were the gentlemen of the jury ready with their verdict? asked the clerk. Yes. Did they find the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty? Not guilty. There was an instant buzz and clamour in the court, and the prisoner, opening out the tight rolled handkerchief, rubbed his hands hard with it, and put it very deliberately in his breast pocket. The judge addressed the prisoner pretty much as the giant addressed Thor in the Norse story—'Better come no more to Jotunheim.' He had

had counsel of singular ability, and the jury had been clement. He was free to go.

Wyncott Esden found himself the centre of a little congratulatory crowd, and one or two of the more genial of the seniors were almost enthusiastic over him. He accepted their compliments with the best grace in the world, being neither shy nor inflated, but just handsomely cordial and obliged.

‘Your bread’s buttered for life, my boy,’ said one of them. ‘as old What’s-his-name said to Eldon. All thieves who can your fees afford will rely on your orations.’

Sundry of the unoccupied, stowing away their wigs and gowns, hummed the refrain of the judge’s song in concert, with an improvised alteration—

And one good burglar he’s restored
To his friends and his relations.

The Term was over, and they were already in the Long Vacation. There was some animated talk about holiday-making, and then, by ones and twos, men filtered away, and Wyncott Esden, dropping into the street, encountered Mr. Prickett in the roadway. The detective touched the brim of his glossy hat with a neatly-gloved forefinger, and bestowed upon the barrister a smile of some complexity. The smile expressed a deprecatory

admiration, and a touch of reproof was visible in it.

‘You pulled him off, sir,’ said Mr. Prickett, with a gentle sorrow in his tone. ‘It’s all in the day’s work, of course, and it’s a thing as our profession has got to look forward to.’ Esden laughed, and, laying a familiar hand upon the detective’s shoulder, gave him an amiable shake, and made as if he would pass on. Mr. Prickett turned upon his heel, and accompanied the other’s steps, bending respectfully towards him, sideways. ‘I wouldn’t have given twopence ha’penny for his chances,’ he continued, ‘and I wouldn’t have accepted a penny under a hundred pounds for mine. I looked on that hundred pounds as a moral, Mr. Esden.’

‘Well, you know, Prickett,’ the barrister answered, turning that sly and friendly eye upon the detective with an engaging smile, ‘it wasn’t my business to earn the hundred pounds for you. If it had been——’

‘Ah!’ said Mr. Prickett. ‘If it had been!’ He walked on a pace or two farther, still bending respectfully towards his companion. ‘A verdict of not guilty,’ he said, ‘establishes a man’s character. It’s no part of my business to go about spreading libels, and, maybe, getting hauled up for ’em. I don’t say, mind you, Mr.

Esden, as Reuben isn't as innocent as a daisy. But I shouldn't call anybody a fool as thought him guilty, and it's my opinion that there isn't a luckier man afoot this minute. He's got a lot to thank you for, Mr. Esden, if you'll allow me to say as much.'

'We must all do our duty, Prickett,' returned Esden, twinkling at him in self-applauding enjoyment. 'We must all do our duty in the varying positions to which it pleases Providence to call us.'

The officer smiled sadly and admiringly, fell back a step, touched the brim of the glossy hat again, and said, 'Good-day, sir.'

Esden walked leisurely down Ludgate Hill and along Fleet Street towards his chambers in the Temple. After the gloom of the court the light of the August evening looked garish, and the street traffic boomed and thundered in contrast with his recent waiting amid the close murmurs of the attending crowd. He had started radiant, smiling, and triumphant, but as he walked on he began to droop, and falling more and more into a dejected mood, he walked into the silences of the Temple with an air altogether despondent. He climbed the monotonous staircase in one of the lofty new houses in Elm Court, until he reached the top, and then,

admitting himself, banged the door behind him with some show of peevishness. Behind the small glass shutter of the letter-box he saw half-a-dozen missives awaiting him, and taking them up, he walked into his sitting-room, and there, with his hat pushed to the back of his head, and his walking stick held under his arm, he opened them, and with a mere glance at the contents of each he threw them on the table. Each letter inclosed an account already rendered, and without exception his correspondents expressed surprise at his neglect of earlier applications. When he had looked at them all he gathered them up, and threw them in a little pile into the grate, and there set fire to them. Then, with an air of fatigued disgust, he strolled into his bedroom, and found a cash-box, which being investigated, yielded a cheque-book with but two leaves left in it, and a solitary bank-note for five pounds. He emptied his pockets, and dribbled their contents about the dressing table.

‘Thirty-five at the bank,’ he said aloud, ‘and eleven in hand. That’s a devilish pretty prospect for the Long Vacation !’

He threw the cheque-book back into the empty box, and, crumpling the note, put it in his pocket. Then, gathering up his loose gold and silver, he left the rooms, and went drooping

down the interminable stairs in a sort of half-humorous dejected savagery of mood. He came out upon Fleet Street, under the shadow of the Gryphon, and after lingering indeterminately for a minute crossed the street briskly, and entered the Cock Tavern. There, ensconcing himself in an unoccupied box, he called for a chop and a modest pint of Beaune, and sat turning over a copy of that evening's paper as he waited. His simple meal being brought to him, he fell to rather languidly, and something catching his attention in the columns of the journal, he folded it conveniently, propped the paper against the cruet-stand, and read and ate together.

Another customer entered the box and sat down facing him. The personage was attired in scrupulous black, a thought too large, and wore irreproachable linen. He carried a white handkerchief crumpled into a ball of about the size of an orange, and dabbed his forehead with it at brief intervals. When the waiter came to learn his desires, the new client spoke in a way which was at once hesitating and confidential, as if he were shy, and his desire for an under-done steak and a pint of bitter ale were somehow in the nature of a secret. The waiter moved off with the order, and the man in black,

for the first time regarding his *vis-à-vis*, started, and looked at him intently, moving his head from side to side to command new points of view. He was obviously surprised, undecided as to his neighbour's identity, and anxious to be sure of it. His uncertainty lasted until the waiter had brought his steak and flitted away again. Then the man in black put out a hand towards the cruet, and said, 'I beg your pardon, sir.'

Esden, looking up, recognised him at a glance, and was recognised in turn. There was no mistaking the fact of recognition on either side, but the barrister, after a cool and leisurely gaze, took up his newspaper, propped it against his wine bottle, and went on eating and reading. The personage whose character had been so recently cleared by a dozen of his peers, rolled his handkerchief between his palms, and looked uncomfortable. In a little while he recovered himself, and attacked his steak with vigour and enjoyment. He made such good progress that he had finished his meal and paid for it before the earlier arrival.

When the barrister paid in turn and rose to go, with no renewed sign of recognition, Reuben Gale rose also. Esden took down his hat and sauntered into the street, and the man

followed him at a distance of half-a-score yards. The barrister turned into Chancery Lane, and Gale, after one or two irresolute quickenings of his pace, made up to him, hat in hand.

‘I believe, sir,’ he said, with a humble shyness, ‘that I have the honour of addressing Mr. Wyncott Esden.’

Esden, from his superior height, looked coldly down across his shoulder.

‘Well,’ he demanded, in a voice of curt disdain.

‘I thought I couldn’t be mistaken,’ said Gale, still keeping pace with him, hat in hand. His voice had an embarrassed, unobtrusive wheeze in it. The man certainly spoke and looked uncommonly unlike a desperate criminal. ‘I really don’t know, sir, how to thank you for the admirable way——’ A passenger walking at a swifter pace than they went by, and Gale paused until he thought him out of hearing. ‘The real beautiful way, sir,’ he said then, ‘you conducted my defence.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Esden, looking down on him with the same careless, scornful glance, and speaking in the same disdainful tone.

‘I am sure,’ the man went on, ‘there’s hardly another gentleman at the bar who could have done for me, sir, what you done this afternoon.’

The case looked very black against me, sir. I don't think, sir, that an innocent man ever had such a squeeze before.'

'Very good,' said Esden, quickening his step.

The man clung to him.

'If it lays in my power,' he said, in his apologetic, wheezing way, 'anyhow to repay you, sir, it would be a weight off of my mind.'

'You must understand,' said Esden, stopping short, and looking down upon him, 'that it is one thing to defend a gentleman of your profession, and another to be seen walking with him in the streets. I am constrained to wish you a very good evening, Mr. Gale.

'Why, that's only fit and proper, sir,' Mr. Gale responded, still clinging to him as he pursued his way. 'I quite reco'nise the gulf which rears itself between us, but a man must follow the dictation of his 'art, sir. You done me such a turn this afternoon, sir, as no man ever done before. Excuse me, sir—I should have said no gentleman.'

'My good friend,' Esden answered, a little mollified by the flattery of the man's gratitude, but scornful still, 'I did my duty professionally, and was paid for it.'

'Ah, sir,' said Mr. Gale, accepting with

evident eagerness this first faint sign of yielding on the other's part, 'how many gentlemen could ha' done what you done, with the best will in the world? Of course a gentleman desires—quite natural—to do his duty, sir, because it stands to reason that's how he makes his name, and fame, and fortune, sir. But, it's knowing how to do it, sir. That's where it is. P'raps you might't care to know, sir, how it came about as I instructed my solicitor to try for nobody but Mr. Wyncott Esden? "That," I says, sir, to my solicitor, "is the gentleman for my money. I happened to step into the Old Bailey, as near twelve months ago as might be, just to pass away a hour, and I heard Mr. Esden," I says to my solicitor, "defending a person of the name of Hatchett, on suspicion of jewellery. Mr. Esden didn't get him off," I says, "but there! if it had laid in the power of mortal gentleman to do it," I says, "he would ha' done it. Mr. Esden was that quiet, that sure and easy. He had that way with the jury. He put 'em in doubt for an hour and a half"—that's what I told my solicitor—"and if anybody else had been there, they'd ha' said guilty on the evidence without so much as leaving the box."

Now Esden was a remarkably clever fellow,

but, like many clever fellows who have gone before him, he was inordinately fond of praise. He was intimately persuaded that Mr. Gale was an arrant rascal, but even a barrister cannot exert himself in behalf of a fellow-creature without taking at least a partisan interest in him; and to find the man so felicitating himself upon his choice of a defender was like milk and honey.

The actual day was falling towards darkness now, as its grimy imitation had fallen into darkness in the Old Bailey hours before. It was extremely improbable that any friend or acquaintance would see him in conversation with his late client, and, even if he were seen, it would not be disagreeable to tell how the fellow clung to him and resisted all snubs in the fullness of his gratitude.

‘So you said to yourself,’ he answered, unbending, and beginning to find a humorous interest in the man, ‘“when it comes to my turn to get into a tight corner, there is the counsel for my money?”’

‘Why, sir,’ responded Mr. Gale, growing more at ease, but still conserving the apologetic manner, ‘it never entered my head at that time of day that such a thing could happen to me.’

‘Of course not,’ Esden answered. ‘It’s odd, though, that Mr. Prickett should have enter-

tained his unjust suspicions for the past five years.'

'Odd, sir!' cried Gale, obsequiously. 'Excuse me, sir, but "odd" is not the word for it. Bloodthirsty is the word, sir.'

Esden had slackened his pace to a mere lounge when once he had become willing that the man should talk to him. They were nearing Holborn now, and he halted outright.

'I am prodigiously obliged to you, Mr. Gale,' he said with a smooth irony, 'for the expression of your satisfaction with my conduct of a case which I admit was difficult and delicate. I think it probable that on the next occasion my services may be of less value to you, though they are always at your disposal. We are now on the edge of the Long Vacation, and I cannot reasonably hope to meet you for three months to come. Once more, I wish you a very good evening.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' Gale answered. 'A man in my position can't talk to a gentleman. He can't say, proper, what he wants to say. But if you'd do me the pleasure, sir, to walk into my business establishment—it's close at hand, sir—I should like to make a proposition of a business nature.'

He had resumed his hat some time before, and

now stood rubbing his hands in an extremity of embarrassment.

‘You would like to make to me,’ said Esden, slowly, in a tone of concentrated surprise, ‘a proposition of a business character?’

‘I should take it as a favour if you’d listen to it, sir. If you’ll do me the honour to walk into my establishment——’

‘*Dit l’araignée à la mouche,*’ said Esden, with a humorous survey of his own proportions and those of his companion. ‘That would be a new form of gratitude,’ he added inwardly.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ said Mr. Gale, ‘I didn’t catch your observation, sir. If you will do me the honour to come in, sir, I should take it as a real favour.’

‘My good fellow,’ replied the barrister, ‘you can say here and now anything you have to say.’

‘Well, to tell the truth, sir,’ Gale responded, ‘that’s just what I can’t do. But if you’ll do me the goodness only just to step round the corner, it won’t take ten words, nor one minute, and I think I can make it worth your while.’

Esden stared at him in the dusk with more and more amazement.

‘This is positively exasperating,’ he told himself. ‘I have never been so curious in my life. Lead the way,’ he said aloud.

‘Thank you,’ sir, responded Mr. Gale. ‘I am very much obliged to you.’

Esden, following him, clipped his walking stick by the middle, and cautiously appreciated its weight. His companion, moving quickly on, drew a bunch of keys from his trouser pocket, and jingled it in his hand as he walked. At the end of a hundred yards, or thereabouts, he paused before a sombre low-browed little shop, the door of which he unlocked with the brisk dexterity of custom. The place gaped black beyond the opened doorway, and the tradesman, moving to one side, invited his companion by a gesture.

‘After you,’ said Esden, still balancing his stick in his right hand.

‘Very good, sir,’ Gale answered, and entering, struck a light and lit a gas jet, which shrieked and sputtered as he applied the match. Esden, following, found himself in an atmosphere the smell of which was compounded of the odours of brown paper, oil, and dry rot in wood. From floor to ceiling on three sides were shelves, as thickly packed as they could hold with symmetrical brown paper packets, all neatly tied and ticketed, and all having a certain aspect of great weight. In a big pair of scales upon the counter five or six pounds of heavy nails had made the balance kick the beam upon the other side,

and the empty scale hung entangled in its chain. Ranged everywhere about the floor and counter in precise order were crowbars of varying sizes, plasterer's chisels, hammers, saws, centre-bits—all the paraphernalia of a tool dealer's shop. In one corner behind the counter a green painted safe stood wedged into the wall amongst the other ponderables.

Gale closed the door, the barrister lounging against the counter, and watching him with a cool and wary eye, not knowing how to guess what might befall, and wondering a little to find himself alone in such company. His companion, without so much as a glance at him, searched his bundle of keys, and passing round the counter, opened the green painted safe. From this he drew a cash-box, which he set upon the counter. Then with an aspect increasingly furtive and embarrassed he unlocked the cash-box in its turn, and counted from it five soiled bank-notes, each for ten pounds.

'I don't know how to put it, sir,' he said, looking up, 'but if a common man's gratitude might take that form, sir——' and he held out the notes, with a dogged thumb clamped down upon them.

'Well, now, upon my word,' said Esden, 'you're not a bad sort of fellow after all. Upon

my word, for a gentleman in your walk of life you are a very unusually decent sort of fellow.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Gale, still holding out the notes. 'I was afraid you might find it offensive, so to speak.'

'Well, you know,' the barrister answered, pushing a quantity of heavy stuff on one side to make room for his elbows, and lounging on the counter, 'it is offensive, and it isn't. Put up the notes, if you please. Put them up at once,' he added sharply, seeing that Gale stared at him with a look of sudden disappointment, and still held the money out towards him.

'I thought you were going to take them, sir,' said Gale.

'Did you, by God?' asked Esden wrathfully. He would have had no need to be angry, and he knew this perfectly well, if it had not been for the temptation which assailed him. It was an impossible thing to do, but nobody could ever hear of it, and he was so ruinously hard up.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Gale, withdrawing the notes at once, 'I didn't know, sir, how a gentleman might feel.'

Esden watched the notes back to their place in the safe with a feeling of reluctance. He half regretted that he had spoken so decisively. After all, why should he have been angry? Why should

he have been such an ass as to throw fifty pounds away ?

Gale made a pretence of arranging things upon the counter. The single gas jet shrieked noisily overhead, and he turned it down a little, and looked at Esden, who was lowering somewhat, with his arms upon the counter.

‘I really must ask you, sir,’ said the tool-maker, ‘not to think I asked you here to put an insult on you. I’ve heard tell of the thing being done before, and looked upon quite otherwise.’

‘I dare say,’ Esden answered, with rather a grand air ; ‘there are people of all sorts.’ Gale was perturbed in the presence of this noble gentleman, and arranged and rearranged a handful of tools upon the counter. ‘You’re a better sort of fellow than I fancied,’ the barrister resumed, in a patronising tone. ‘I was annoyed at first, I admit, but I can see that you meant well, and were really grateful for my services.’

‘I am indeed, sir,’ said Gale obsequiously.

‘Well, come now,’ said Esden, with a sudden brightness, taking an easier posture, ‘let me test this gratitude of yours.’

‘With all my heart, sir.’

‘Good,’ said Esden, with the sly, friendly, persuasive smile in full play again. ‘You do know a little bit about that business, don’t you ;

Mr. Gale? Knowledge is power, you know. I am a barrister in criminal practice, and it might come in handy one of these days if I only knew as much as you could tell me.'

The tool-maker assumed an air of rectitude perhaps too conscious.

'The very honestest tradesman in my line, sir,' he replied, 'must run the risk of meeting very dicky people now and then, and doing business with them.'

'Naturally,' said Esden, smiling still. 'Now tell me what an honest tradesman in your line may know.' Mr. Gale hesitated. 'About burgling tools for instance.'

'In a proper way of speaking, sir,' the honest tradesman answered, 'there's no such thing as burgling tools. In another way of speaking, there's hardly what you might call a tool in the shop as might not be used by a burglar in his way of business. There's the drill and the cold chisel, and the crowbar, from a Lord Mayor down to a pocket jemmy. All these are used in honest labour every day of the year. If a man's a burglar and knows his trade and can afford it, he'll have 'em a bit finer than a common tradesman will.'

'Out of professional pride?' asked the barrister.

‘Why yes, sir, a little bit of that, sometimes, but generally to be more useful. Of course, it’s more particular than common work. It’s got to be done quick. It’s got to be done quiet. For instance, a man comes to me to buy a hammer—say as it’s a short-handled hammer, with a heavy head, like this—a kind of tool that’s used in a round dozen of trades. If he wants it for night-work he gets it covered thick with leather, and he has the top of his cold chisel covered the same way, and before he starts on the job he soaks the leather two or three hours in water, so as there’s hardly any sound when he uses ’em. Then sometimes they have their iron tools all coated with leather, so as not to jingle when they carry ’em about, and if the crowbars are too long to be got into a decent sized carpet-bag, they has ’em made in len’ths, to screw together, the joints fitting airtight, and the screw very long. Why,’ he exclaimed, after a momentary pause, with an air of sudden remembrance, ‘I’ve got the very article on the premises at this minute, if you don’t mind waiting alone for a second or two while I find it!’

He left the shop, and presently returned, bearing in his hand a small leather-covered crowbar, the exposed ends of which—the one

split and curved like the nail-drawer of an ordinary hammer, and the other flat and with an almost razor-like edge—shone in the gaslight like polished silver.

‘It’s rather curious how I come to have such a thing in my possession.’ There was a momentary gleam of obsequious humour in Mr. Gale’s look as he spoke the last words. ‘I’ll tell you. One day, six months ago it was, sir, or it might perhaps ha’ been seven, a well-dressed, respectable gent come into this very shop, and give me an order for a set of tools. “I want ’em,” he says, “of the very best steel, and made according to these directions,” which he give me, standing on the identical spot as you’re standing on at this minute—a complete set of jemmies, of all sizes, and two or three other articles. He was very free and chatty, and he told me how he was very fond of turning and carpenter’s work. “It’s took me three years to furnish my house,” he says, “and there isn’t a single article of furniture in it, from the attics to the basement, as isn’t my own handiwork.” Well, of course, that kind of thing is common enough, sir, as you know. There’s lots of gents as finds time hang heavy, and passes it in that way. It puzzled me a bit what he could want all the jemmies for, and specially why he wanted

'em all covered with leather, like this one. But it was no affair of mine, and I took the order, and he give me two pounds on account, quite the gentleman in all ways, sir, and he went away, and that's the last I ever heard of him from that day to this.'

'He never came for the tools?' asked Esden.

'Never, sir. This is one of 'em. Now, if there is such a thing as a burgling tool in London, that's the article. And it's as good a bit of work as I ever laid a hammer on. If it wasn't for the leather coating, I'd defy anybody, even you sir, to find the join. Look here, sir.' With the quick dexterity of a practised mechanic he unscrewed the tool so rapidly that it seemed almost to fall into two pieces in his hands. 'Look at that, sir,' he said, indicating the screw, 'It fits like watchwork, and, thin as it is, there isn't a door in all London that wouldn't fly like the lid of a match-box if you could find a crack big enough to get the edge of the hook into it.'

Mr. Gale had become a little excited in admiration of his own handiwork; and his fingers, which were amazingly knotty and muscular to belong to so slight a man, closed on the crow-bar with a nervous grip as he illustrated the action of the tool. In the very act he caught

Esden's slyly twinkling smile, and stopped in a momentary discomfiture.

'Rather an ugly thing, isn't it, for a suspected burglar to have about his premises?' asked Esden.

'Why, yes, sir,' said Gale, with a rather overdone candour. 'A very ugly thing. And the curious part of it is, sir, that though the police searched the premises on my arrest, and have been here lots of times since, they didn't find 'em. Good Lord! If they had!' The sudden wince he gave at the fancy was real enough, and he dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief again. 'Providence protects the innocent, sir. They was lying where anybody might ha' found 'em, among the other stock, and yet they missed 'em. It was the finger of Providence. That's what I call it, Mr. Esden, sir. It was the finger of Providence.'

Esden, still twinkling, turned the two halves of the tool over and over in his hands, examining them with obvious interest, and then screwed them together.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's a pretty bit of workmanship.'

'I've got an idea, Mr. Esden,' said Gale, leaning with a sudden persuasive smile across the counter. 'You wouldn't accept the money

—you'll excuse me, sir, for even mentioning that little mistake of mine again, sir, I'm sure. Will you take that, sir, as a suvveneer of a grateful client, sir?'

'This?' asked Esden, holding out the tool in a comic amazement.

'Why not, sir? I wouldn't offer it to anybody as might turn up, sir. But in the hands of a gentleman like you—and it's worth nothing—nothing, that is, to speak of, so as you needn't be ashamed to accept it from a poor man as owes you a very great obligation, sir.'

'Why, what should I do with such a thing as this?' asked Esden.

'Why, of course, sir, it's no use to you. But it's interesting, sir—interesting from association, as one may say. And it's a good bit of stuff, and capital workmanship, if a man may say so much about a thing as he's made himself. Take it, Mr. Esden, sir. It's no use to me; in fact, it's dangerous, and it might be years before I found a customer as wanted such a thing. You can carry it quite easy in your breast pocket, so.' He unscrewed it, and held the pieces out towards the barrister. 'Pray take it, sir, as a suvveneer.'

'Well, after all, why not?' said Esden with a laugh.

CHAPTER II.

AT high noon on the following day, Esden, sitting shirtsleeved in his apartments, looked his own personal circumstances discontentedly in the face. When things went uncomfortably with him it was his habit to decline to look at them. He was a young man who liked to see the bright side of things, and he had no love for shadows. The prospect now before him was almost altogether dark, and he grew easily weary of the mental landscape. He had to look at it, and he continued to look until his gorge rose.

‘I shall go melancholy mad if I don’t get out of this,’ he said aloud. ‘I must go somewhere and talk to somebody.’

He rose, and sauntered dispiritedly into his bedroom, taking up a clothes-brush by the way, and, reaching down from its peg the coat he had worn on the previous evening, began idly to brush at it, pausing twice or thrice in the course of that simple operation to fall into a

despondent day-dream. When he awoke from the last of these excursions the clothes-brush struck upon something hard, and remembering Mr. Gale's curious souvenir he drew the house-breaking implement from the pocket in which he had placed it, and began to turn it over and to screw together the pieces of which it was composed. Anything is good enough for an idle and unhappy man to think about, and Esden was pleased to divert his thoughts even by such a trifle as this.

'I don't see where the magic of it comes in,' he said. 'That fellow declared that any door would fly before it if one could only get the edge in. The lever's a mighty power, no doubt, but I fancy that a thing of this size would want a lot of muscle behind it.'

He looked about him to see if there were anything in the chamber upon which he could test the force of the implement, and decided that he would try its capacities upon one of the bedroom doors. To that end he went back to the sitting-room, and closed and locked the door; then inserting the claw of the little crow-bar in the cleft between door and door-jamb near the lock, he gave a tug, proportioned, as he fancied, to the necessities of the case. For a moment or two he hardly knew how to be

surprised at the result, for the door, flying open with a swift-rending sound, struck him smartly on the side of the head, and put all inquiry into the forces of the lever out of mind.

‘Scotch engineering,’ he said, rubbing the side of his head with a rueful grin. ‘Main strength and foolishness. I might as well have chucked a sovereign out of window. It will take that at least to repair the damage. Hang Mr. Gale, and confound his souvenir.’

He threw the implement away at haphazard, and, falling in a straight line on the pillow of the bed at the very edge of the neatly folded coverlid, it rolled over and lay hidden.

‘There’s a demoniac adroitness about that tool,’ said Esden, still rubbing at the injured spot. ‘It hides itself as if it knew its work was over, and that it has no business to be seen.’

With an occasional glance at the shattered lock, and here and there an exclamation of impatience at his own clumsiness and folly, he proceeded to attire himself for the streets. He winced a little under the application of his hair brushes, and broke into profane sayings when he discovered that his hat was considerably too small to be conveniently worn.

‘One can’t go out like this,’ he said pettishly,

as he surveyed himself in the mirror, 'with one's hat perched on one ear, like a Jew shop-boy's on a holiday. It's lucky the bruise is under the hair. I'm a philosopher to find anything lucky under the circumstances, though I suppose I ought to be thankful for having got off without a black eye.'

Whilst he grumbled thus to himself, exchanging, with no sense of gratitude, the contemplation of serious troubles for that of small ones, there came a knock at his outer door, and he strode with a tragic mien to answer it. No sooner had he opened the door and set eyes upon the man who stood beyond it, than he brightened into instant good-humour, and executed a hearty shake-hands. The arrival was dressed like a cleric, but apart from his dress he wore an air utterly unclerical. He was about six feet in height, broad-shouldered, deep chested, and as well set up as if newly dismissed from the drill yard. He had a most wholesome red and white complexion, and a big, dragoon-looking moustache, so that, except for a certain suggestion of brains he carried, he might have passed for a Guardsman in disguise. He was one of those men who preserve a physical condition so perfect that even in the hottest summer weather in London they contrive always

to look cool and clean. Such people convey to their very clothing a sense of their own wholesomeness. Their linen is crisper than that of people less favoured, their boots acquire less dust, and their clothes take fewer wrinkles.

‘Come in, Arnold, old chap!’ cried Esden. ‘I’m glad to see you. I was just thinking of turning into the Strand and getting an iced-fruit drink ; but, upon my soul, you’re such an excellent substitute for it that I don’t feel thirsty any longer.’

The dragoon-like cleric came in laughing and closed the door behind him with a motion of his foot.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ asked Esden. ‘You’d better go into the next room and get a wash. You look as if your left ear had been black-leaded.’

The clergyman laughed, and even blushed a little.

‘Soap and water will make no impression on that for a day or two,’ he said. ‘That, as a point of fact’—blushing a little more pronouncedly—‘is a remembrance of one of my parishioners.’

‘You don’t mean to say that they hammer the church down there?’ asked Esden.

‘My dear Wyncott, there are people in

Limehouse who would hammer anything hammerable, from the Pope downwards.'

、 'Why don't you clear out of that,' asked Esden, 'and take a respectable living? You've got plenty of chances.'

'Well, I don't know,' said the parson. 'The people interest me. We're getting to like each other.'

'*Ecce signum*,' said the barrister, indicating the bruised ear.

'My dear fellow,' returned the other, 'you mayn't believe it, but you never said a truer word than that in your life. *Ecce signum*! I never made so small an effort and secured such results by it.'

'Expound,' said the barrister, thrusting out a lazy foot and pushing a chair against the damaged door.

'One Sunday night, after service,' said the cleric, still blushing, 'a woman came to me at the Mission House—an excellent person—and complained that William had got upon the burst again. Now William had been going pretty squarely for a good five months, and he and I had got to be on capital terms. I'll tell you the whole thing exactly as it happened. I was fortunate enough to find William at a moment of repentance five months back, when

he had spent his last twopence, and was deserted by his pals. I had a good talk with him, stood him a dinner and a drink, and brought him to see the error of his ways. He promised to drink no more for a month—a month doesn't look very terrible, and I like to make things look easy, and he stuck to his promise like a brick. At the end of the month I got him to sign again. At the end of that time he got hankering after the porter-pots of the Burdett Road, and all I could do was to get him to promise that he would tell me faithfully whenever I met him what he had spent on liquor since I had seen him last. I have found that work with some of them. Those chaps, you must understand, are very clumsy at lying. They're not like people of our own class, who have studied all their life long to do it gracefully. It is not so much, perhaps, that they want the will, as that they lack the practice. William wouldn't lie after the first or second time, because he found out sympathetically, that I knew when he was at it. I haunted him rather badly, and he took umbrage and kept away, so that I wasn't surprised on Sunday when the excellent Mrs. Perkins turned up and told me that William hadn't appeared on the previous day with his week's money. As soon

as I could get free, I went after him, drew half a dozen places blank, and finally unearthed him in the Turk's Head.

“Now, William,” said I, “this is against the contract.” William refused to touch the question, and became personally offensive. I told him that wasn't just or manly. “You know,” said I, “that a clergyman can't use bad language. Therefore, William, it is cowardly to use bad language to a clergyman, just as it's cowardly to use a stick or a knife against a man who has only his hands to defend himself.” “Oh, if it comes to that,” said William, “put 'em up.” Now, as a matter of fact, pursued this unusual cleric, laughing in an embarrassed manner at his host, ‘that is an exercise which I have never been averse to. The proposal did not logically spring from anything that I had said, but Mr. Perkins seemed to think it did, and his companions shared his view. I tried to persuade my strayed lamb to go back to the fold with a whole skin, but this well-meant effort was derided by William and the crowd as an evidence of pusillanimity. Until then, though I'd been on the edge of it a score of times, more or less, I had never felt it to be my duty as a Christian clergyman, to give any of my parishioners a hiding. I said as much to

William. I pointed out to him gently, though I was afraid it might look like bragging, that I was one of Angelo's pet pupils, and that I could probably walk round him like a cooper round a cask, and hit him where I wanted. The long and short of the story is, that what between William's folly and my own mismanagement I was compelled to retire with him to a neighbouring court, or to lose whatever hold I was beginning to get upon those fellows. So I chose what seemed the less of the two evils, and took on more than I knew of. For William, though a little stale, turned out to be a past master in the art, and in the course of some five minutes got to be on terms of greater intimacy with me than anybody has been since I had that turn-up at Hampton Court with the nigger with the banjo.'

'I remember the nigger with the banjo,' said Esden. 'He was a very useful man.'

'Mr. Perkins,' pursued the cleric, 'was about as good, but he suffered from being out of form.'

'So,' said Esden, 'you pensioned his widow, like Codlingsby, and settled sixpence a year apiece on the infant progeny?'

'No,' said the embarrassed clergyman. 'But I gained the goodwill of the whole assemblage. Mr. Perkins admitted that he had had enough,

and I extracted a promise from him that if ever he broke out again he would stand up and take a similar dose. He will be so little hungry for it, that I think the prospect may help to keep him straight. You'd hardly believe,' he added, 'what a hero I've been since the news of this business got abroad. All I have to do now is just to keep the hold I've got upon the men I really want to touch. As for the feeble respectable folk, they think me a child of Satan, and that's natural enough, of course. But then wherever was there a man, in the whole history of the world, who was worth his salt, and cared about the verdict of respectable people?'

'It's a pity,' said Esden, laughing, 'that the man didn't land on the eye instead of the ear. A parson with a black eye would be quite a refreshing spectacle.'

'Hillo!' cried the clergyman, suddenly perceiving the shattered lock upon the bedroom door. 'What's this? Burglary?'

'A bit of amateur work,' said Esden. 'The result of a presentation from a client of mine. I defended a fellow yesterday, and got him off with flying colours. He actually dined at the same table with me last night at the Cock, and he was abominably grateful. He wanted to give me—wait a minute. There's the postman.'

A little handful of letters fell noisily into the box behind the outer door, and Esden made a dash from the room and returned with them.

‘Excuse me, Arnold,’ he said, ‘I’m expecting something of importance. I must look at these.’

He opened the letters and glanced rapidly over them, with muttered exclamations of discontent, until he came to one which seemed to give him serious disquiet. He walked with this to the window, and, propping himself against the wall in the recess, appeared to read it more than once from beginning to end. His face was troubled, and he clawed his hair with a gesture of perplexity.

‘J. P.’s handwriting, isn’t it?’ said the clergyman, pushing the envelope across the table. ‘Nothing the matter with him, I hope?’

‘Suffering from my own complaint,’ said Esden. ‘He’s hard up. Wants to know if I can’t let him have some money.’

‘You haven’t been borrowing from J. P., I hope,’ said the other.

‘Borrowing from J. P.?’ cried Esden, in a voice of unexpected irritation. ‘Who, in the name of wonder, would think of borrowing from J. P.? He’s as poor as a church mouse, and has half a dozen children.’

He folded the letter, and thrust it into his waistcoat-pocket. Then, advancing to the table, he took up the sole remaining epistle, and tore it open with a look of expectant disgust. As he read it his face brightened, and by-and-by he broke out with a 'Tra la la!' to a popular dance tune, and took a turn or two with an imaginary partner.

'That's better,' said his companion.

'My dear boy,' Esden answered, turning with a suddenly solemn countenance, 'you don't know how much better it is. I'll be hanged—I suppose a man may say he'll be hanged in the presence of the cloth—I'll be hanged if I knew how I should get through the vacation. And here's an invitation from Wootton Hill to spend a couple of months there if I like. If I like! Sha'n't I like? The old lady says Miss Pharr is there. Do you know, old chap, I rather think the old lady wants to give me a chance with Miss Pharr? I think you know her. Scottish heiress. Freckled a bit. Reddish haired. Not bad looking. And the Oof Bird he singeth all day in her bowers. O'd Pharr, her uncle, died at the beginning of the year, and left her everything.'

The young clergyman rose and paced up and down the room, with a single glance at Esden.

'I should have thought better of you,' he

said, somewhat brusquely, 'than to suppose that you were a fortune hunter.'

'All but the fortune finders scorn the fortune hunters,' said Esden. 'But show me a chance of marrying a girl with fifteen thousand a year, and I'll take it. So would you.'

'I beg your pardon,' said the parson, stiffly. 'I would do nothing of the sort.'

His face, voice, and gait displayed more anger than the occasion seemed to call for, but he quieted himself and resumed his seat.

'You were telling a story,' he said, still speaking a little gloomily, 'about a fellow you defended yesterday.'

'Was I?' said Esden. 'Ah, yes. The burglar. There was no moral doubt in the world about his being guilty, but I wheedled the jury, and I got him off. He wanted to give me——'

The story of Mr. Gale's curious souvenir was obviously not to be told that day. A knock at the outer door cut short Esden's speech, and he hastened to answer it. When he caught sight of his visitor, he raised a swift forefinger, and laid it on his lips, with a backward nod of the head to indicate the presence of a third person in the rooms. The outer door opened upon a square little hall, and from this two other doors opened, one leading to the bedroom and the

other to the living-room. The bedroom door stood ajar, and Esden indicating it with a gesture, the newcomer passed through it on tiptoe, silently and rapidly. The visitor was a pretty girl, lady-like, but not quite a lady. She had fine, dark, intelligent eyes and a wealth of black hair. She was attired very simply, but with a scrupulous neatness, and in a style which gave her at first sight almost an air of distinction. When she had passed into the bedroom, Esden drew the door cautiously towards him and secured the latch. Then, he said, in a voice audible to the clergyman :

‘All right. It will take me five minutes to find the papers, but I’ll come round directly I have them.’

He spoke as if he addressed somebody without, and then slamming the outer door, returned bustlingly.

‘I haven’t time for another word, old fellow,’ he said, seizing on a japanned tin box which stood in one corner of the room. ‘Most intricate case,’ he went on, fumbling for his keys, and kneeling on the floor beside the box. ‘Shall have to work at it during the vacation.’

‘When are you going down to Wootton?’ asked the clergyman.

‘To-morrow,’ said Esden. ‘Don’t bother me

now, there's a good old chap. Let me see, I want the Ffolliott papers, and that copy of Jamieson's will, and Walker's affidavits.' He had unlocked the box by this time, and was rummaging amidst its contents.

'Very well,' said his visitor; 'I'll go, since you're busy. I may see you again in a week or two.'

'All right,' Esden answered, springing to his feet and shaking hands with an air of hurry and absorption. 'Good-bye, old fellow. Sorry to chase you in this way. Hoped we might have had a long chat together.'

Talking thus, he accompanied his guest to the outer door, and being rid of him, dropped his business looks at once and entered the bedroom, laughing at the easy success of his small stratagem.

'Well, my dear,' he cried, advancing to the girl as if to embrace her. 'This is an unexpected pleasure. You can't guess how glad I am to see you.'

The girl looked disdainfully at him, and held out a hand to warn him away.

'Let us have no nonsense, if you please, Mr, Esden. I came here upon a matter of importance to myself. If I had been left to my own will I should never have wished to see your face again.'

‘Don’t be cruel, darling,’ said Esden. ‘If you knew how I pined to see you, and how happy the sight of your face made me a minute ago, you would be kinder.’

He bent over her in an attitude of mingled respect and tenderness as he spoke. His voice murmured with so persuasive an entreaty that she took fright at it, and stamped her foot with a gust of defensive anger.

‘I will not suffer you to talk to me in this way,’ she said, with hands tightly clenched and eyes flashing. ‘I was a fool ever to believe that you meant honestly by me. But I am not fool enough to listen to a villain.’

‘Hard words for such soft and pretty lips to use,’ said Don Juan, with the same tender and reverential air. ‘I should like your portrait painted as you stand. You look gloriously handsome when you’re angry. Not that I don’t like other expressions better. But then, you see, I’m not only madly in love with you, but I’m a bit of an artist.’

She turned away from him, and, pushing open the door which led to the sitting-room, passed beyond it and took up a place upon the hearthrug.

‘When you will listen to me,’ she said, ‘I will say what I have to say and go.’

‘If you will think a minute,’ he responded, ‘you will see what a poor reason you give me for listening. Say what you want to say, and stay.’

‘I have taken a place as lady’s maid,’ she began, entering upon her story with no further preface.

‘What a wretched shame!’ broke in Esden. ‘There’s no justice, even for beauty, nowadays. A thousand years ago you’d have met King Cophetua.’

‘My mistress,’ she went on, having waited for him with an angry self-control, ‘is a Miss Pharr—Miss Janet Pharr.’

‘The deuce she is!’ said Esden, surprised out of his airs of gallantry.

‘Miss Pharr is a guest at your aunt’s house at Wootton Hill. I was in the room when they were talking about you last night, and I heard Mrs. Wyncott say that she was writing to invite you down. I got a holiday this morning on purpose to come here. You will be good enough, if you please, not to take any notice of me when you come, and not to let it be known that we have ever met before.’

‘It’s lucky,’ said Esden, ‘that my cousin Arnold didn’t see you. He’s always about the house there, more or less, when he can snatch

an hour or two from his work, and he was here when you came in. You might have relied on my discretion, even without taking the trouble to warn me, darling.'

'If you were really a gentleman in your heart,' she answered angrily, 'you would let a girl's word be enough. I have told you that it is unpleasant to me to be addressed in that way.'

'How can I help it, dear? You *are* my darling!'

She moved towards the door, without further response than that vouchsafed by an angry and contemptuous glance, and he, interposing himself, began to plead with her.

'Let me pass,' she said.

'You were different once,' cried Esden, 'not so long ago. You even told me that you cared for me.'

Her face went very white, and she breathed unevenly, so that when she answered him her utterance was halting and irregular.

'I did care for you. I am ashamed of myself because I care for you now, even though I have found out what kind of man you are. I can tell you that quite safely, Mr. Esden, and I shall be all the stronger for having told you. You made me love you, and then you taught me to despise you.'

She had read the words somewhere, and the air with which she spoke them smacked a little of the footlights. But she was none the less evidently in earnest. Esden shrugged his shoulders with submission, and opened the door for her.

‘Let us part friends at least,’ he said, extending his hand.

‘Let us part as strangers,’ she answered, ‘and meet as strangers. I have wished bitterly, a thousand times, that we had been strangers always.’

She moved swiftly past him, and ran down the stairs. He followed for a pace or two, and looked after her, but she did not turn her head.

CHAPTER III.

WYNCOTT ESDEN had still another visitor that day—a long-haired, long-handed, nervous man, with a face that looked all nose. He had an impediment in his speech, and was inclined to be confidentially tearful. He answered to the name of J. P., and seemed contented with that mutilated form of address.

‘You won’t think I’m bothering you, will you?’ said J. P. ‘But if you forget that bill, you’ll break me. I can’t meet it, any more than I can fly.’

‘My dear fellow,’ responded Esden, ‘there’s no earthly need for you to worry. You may regard the thing as being settled. You will never hear another word about it.’

The visitor, protesting that a great weight was taken from his mind, withdrew, and left Esden to himself.

‘I must really do something about that matter,’ he confessed, ‘and I must do it at once, though where the deuce the money is to come

from is more than I can guess. I can't ruin J. P. That's out of the question. I'll see Sheldon. I'll go and see him now.'

He walked briskly into the Strand, and, hailing a hansom, drove to the offices of a money-lending solicitor of his acquaintance in Cork Street. Mr. Sheldon, despite his Christian-sounding name, was eminently Jewish in aspect and accent.

'Want money?' he said, when Esden had unfolded his story. 'So do I. So does everybody. You're likely to want it, and to go on wanting it. There's more of your paper in the market than I'd give a farthing in the pound for.'

'I can't let the other fellow in for the bill,' said Esden.

'Very well, then,' responded the solicitor. 'Don't.'

Esden had never worked at a jury as he worked at this obdurate Hebrew. He coaxed, cajoled, and flattered. He said a hundred good things, and the solicitor, who had a sense of fun, laughed until his sides ached. But whenever the insidious borrower returned to his theme, or gave a sign of returning to it, the Hebrew grew unchristian and morose. He employed a frankness which was nothing short of brutal.

‘Dot a farthig! It isn’t good enough.’

It became evident in a while that Esden might as well hope to carve adamant with a quill as to squeeze gold from this Hebrew quartz, and he surrendered the effort with an apparent perfect good humour.

‘If you won’t, you know, you won’t.’

‘I won’t,’ said the solicitor, with unnecessary affirmation.

The barrister went away, to try his persuasive arts on others, but found the hour too late. Next day he scoured the City, and spent a pound in cab fares, to no effect. There was not a man in the whole money-lending confraternity who would have advanced him half-a-crown on his note of hand for fifty pounds. To deal fairly with him, it must be admitted that J. P.’s petitionary nose and feeble mouth and aspect of tearful intimacy were constantly before him, and the sense of obligation lay with an almost leaden weight upon his heart. It was certain that he had never meant to swindle poor J. P. He had only meant to have, by hook or by crook, a hundred and fifty pounds, and it was dreadful to think that so small a sum of money should grow into so horrible a burden for any man to carry. For his own part, he felt that he could have supported a million. If

people could have been found to trust him with the amount of the National Debt, its proportions would never have appalled him. But he was J. P.'s vicar, so to speak, and did his suffering for him. J. P. had a wife and six children, and it was sad to think that the poor man was going to be ruined by an act of friendly confidence. Esden felt, all humbug apart, that he was really very, very sorry. But after all, if the money was not to be got at, it was not to be got at, and there was nothing for it but to trust to the chapter of accidents.

His last unavailing effort to secure the money brought him close to a City station and a restaurant. He was tired and hungry, and the hour at which he had promised himself to reach Wootton Hill had come and gone already. So he resolved to economise time, and to that end despatched a commissionaire with a note to his laundress, instructing her to pack up such of his belongings as would be necessary for a month's stay in the country. He dined whilst the man was away, and on his return with the luggage took the down train. He bought an evening journal or two, and was at first too vexed to read. But being of that elastic sort of mind which insistently returns to its native shape after any amount of twisting from without, he

fell back into comfort and good-humour almost before he knew it, and was reading and smoking with perfect placidity when the train drew up at the station. He was known there, and the station-master saluted him with a deference which was all the pleasanter on account of that little trouble of J. P.'s. Esden's aunt was the personage of the neighbourhood, and her guests naturally became people of local distinction. It was a little soothing to a man who could not for his soul raise so small a sum as one hundred and fifty pounds to wear the air of a person of distinction. It helped to rehabilitate him in his own opinion.

'Very sorry, sir,' said the station-master respectfully, 'we sha'n't be able to send up your luggage for an hour. Leastways, not the whole of it. The man's just gone up to the 'Ill 'Ouse, sir, with the 'andcart.'

'All right,' said Esden; 'let me have it to-night.'

'Of course, sir. Without fail,' the station-master responded.

Esden walked away, feeling like an hereditary lord of the soil. Poor J. P. and his affairs had melted and were far away.

The Hill House was a residence of considerable size, with little or no pretension to architectu-

ral beauty. It stood over the surrounding country, and was visible for a mile or two in almost any direction. It had a number of great stately trees about it, and there was something homely, serene, and mellow in its aspect, in spite of its exposure to all sorts of winds and weathers. The high road led over the hill, and the gates were not more than two score yards from the house itself. The space was filled in by a lawn of ancient verdure, dotted with great trees, and an extension of this lawn in the rear of the house was shut out from the common gaze by a line of unusually well-grown rhododendron bushes. The house was bisected, as to its lower story, by an open hall, which ran from front to rear; and when both doors were opened, as they often were in summer weather, people who drove by could look over the outer wall, across the lawn, along the shining expanse of polished oak flooring, and on to the sun-bathed green of the lawn in the rear. The two upper stories of the house were each in like manner divided by a corridor, and a broad winding staircase mounted at either end of the building to those upper regions.

Esden, strolling comfortably uphill, saw before him a man trundling a handcart. The man, pausing to rest, propped the wheel of the hand-

cart with a stone, sat down upon one of the shafts, and mopped his forehead. The barrister came up with him just as he was preparing to start anew. He walked along by the side of the handcart, and read the superscription on the packages it contained.

‘You’re going to Hill House?’ he said affably. The man answered in the affirmative. ‘Bring my luggage on there from the station as soon as you can get back, there’s a good fellow.’

The man was a new-comer, and Esden felt a certain mild pleasure in making him aware of his destination. The fellow touched his cap immediately, and looked respectful.

‘You have a pretty heavy load there,’ said Esden, condescendingly.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the man. ‘Photographic tools, these is, sir. The lady’s been down half-a-dozen times to ask after ’em, sir.’

‘Photographic tools?’ said Esden. ‘Enough to set up a professional man. Don’t forget my luggage.’

With that he sauntered affably along, and reached the house a hundred yards before the messenger. As he entered at the gate a little group of girls, habited in white flannel, and twining together very prettily and affectionately, were moving across the lawn, chattering

like a flock of starlings. Behind them, an elderly gentleman in black gave his arm to an elderly lady in grey. The visitor quickened his step and came up to the old couple.

‘Well, aunt,’ he said cheerfully, ‘here I am, and very glad I am to be here.’

‘My dear Wyncott,’ the old lady responded, ‘we are very glad to have you.’

The girls turned at the sound of the new arrival’s voice, and one of them walked towards him with a frank and boylike smile, and a hand outstretched in welcome.

‘You have not forgotten me, Mr. Esden?’

There was a faint indication of a Scottish accent in the voice, and the speaker had the true Scotch fairness of complexion. She could hardly have been called a beauty, but there was something at first sight charming and engaging in her looks. She had frank and brave grey eyes, and a great quantity of brownish bronze hair, which just now floated about her head in a picturesque confusion. She had a knack of tossing this mane into shape by a swift motion of the head, and what with her fearless and friendly look, the extreme uprightness of her carriage, and something almost virile in her manner of shaking hands, she was at least as much like a boy in petticoats as she was like a young woman,

notwithstanding the really supple and graceful lines of a very womanly figure.

Esden protested gaily that her question was an insult alike to his understanding and his heart. There was a laugh at this, and with another handshake, and a bow or two, he moved on towards the house with the party.

‘I am the bearer of good news, Miss Pharr,’ he said. ‘I am the advance guard of contentment.’

‘That is very nice to know,’ Miss Pharr responded, with a spice of friendly satire in her tone.

‘Your photographic apparatus,’ said Esden, ‘is at this instant at the gate.’

‘No!’ cried the lady, in a tone of unexpected delight and energy, and without another word she turned and sped towards the gate by which Esden had entered. There she paused with a sort of expectant dance on tiptoe, and her hands clasped together, a straw hat in the one and a racket in the other. A little breeze was blowing up the hill, and her beautiful hair was waving and dancing in it. Esden turned upon his heel and followed her at leisure.

‘She isn’t bad-looking,’ he said to himself, ‘and she has charming ways. I suspect that her way with the cheque-book is about as

charming as any of them. I shall make as much running as I can, Miss Pharr, and you may take my word for it.'

The young lady was fairly alight with expectation and excitement. When the man wheeled the handcart into the drive, she laid hands upon the packages one by one, and walked alongside fondling them. She took up one of the lighter parcels and carried it in her arms, and, seeing Esden laughing at this enthusiasm, nodded brightly and laughed back at him in a pretty triumph.

'By George!' said Esden, inwardly, 'she's really jolly. She wasn't half as pretty as this last year.'

He forgot that last year the lady's income had been much more limited than it was at present. There had been no such reason for admiring her.

In some five minutes' time the dining-room presented a scene of prodigious litter. Miss Pharr had always been spoiled, had always been enthusiastic, and had always had her own way. Now, with fifteen thousand a year at her back, she had it more than ever. Such a cutting of cords, such a crackling and unfolding of brown paper, and such a wild heaping of articles upon chairs and tables, the sober apartment had never known before. Everything was pronounced

superb of its sort, and there was such a chorus of admiration as might have been excited amongst a party of tourists admitted to view the splendours of Aladdin's palace. Then the dressing-bell rang, and the servants were summoned in haste to carry away all the newly arrived treasures, and to make the apartment habitable once more.

The old lady lingered, after everybody but Esden had trooped upstairs. She was stout and scant of breath, and got about with difficulty, so that she had her apartments upon the ground floor.

'I shall put you next to Miss Pharr, my dear,' she said, in a confidential tone, with a twinkle of her kind old eyes. 'Now, you know what I think about the matter. Quite apart from her money, she is a charming girl, and she would make you a better wife than you deserve.'

'I,' said Esden, 'am the most obedient of nephews.'

'You are very clever and handsome,' the old lady responded, 'though I am afraid you are wickeder than you ought to be, like your poor dear father before you. Now run away and dress.'

'My dear aunt,' said Esden, 'I must confess to one crime. I have dined already. I was

busy in the city, and had no time for luncheon, and I got so hungry that I really couldn't stand it any longer; and I can't dress because there was nobody at the station to bring up my luggage.'

'You must come to table and entertain us. I forgot to tell you—you can't have your old room, because Miss Pharr is there. Yours is the blue room at the other end of the corridor.'

Esden escorted his aunt to the door of her apartments, and then went upstairs, well pleased. J. P. and his concerns were miles away by this time, as clean forgotten as though they had never existed. The young gentleman felt that he had made an excellent fresh impression upon the heiress. She evidently retained a friendly memory of him, and when he had made such a toilet as he could he sat down at his bedroom window, and lost all sight of outward things whilst he laid his plan of campaign. He decided that he would not cease to be frankly friendly for at least a week. Then he saw himself growing a little shy, and looked on at the change with a sly and humorous self-approval. Then he went over a scheme of embarrassment at her appearances, of chance encounters to be carefully arranged for; of abrupt departures, when honest circumstances should leave them together. He

would take in the old lady herself, and make her his *confidante*. He would grow ashamed of the mere thought of fortune-hunting when once his heart was genuinely engaged. At this he grinned and rubbed his hands delightedly. It would be high comedy to have his aunt frightened at his threat of a noble and self-sacrificing desire to quit the field, and excellent fun to be reluctantly persuaded to continue the chase—love conquering even the fear of being thought athirst for lucre. He revelled in all this in anticipation, even apart from any hope of final success. He was a *ruseur* by nature, and hardly knew a higher joy than to conquer by persuasive trickery; and in a sort of fashion he was honest with it all. If he won he would make an excellent husband, and his wife would be proud of him. The battle of the courts was the breath of his nostrils, and he credited himself with brains enough to justify him in forecasting for himself one of the highest prizes to be gained at the bar.

The dinner bell roused him from these dreams, and he went gaily down to conquer.

CHAPTER IV.

HE was less entertaining and amusing than he had meant to be, because the dinner-table talk was mainly confined to a subject of which he was entirely ignorant. But reflecting wisely that a good listener is just about as entertaining to other people as a good talker is to himself, he preserved for the most part a charming silence.

It was natural that, after the arrival of Miss Pharr's newly-acquired treasure, the talk should fall upon photography. There were two amateur experts at table, and one as yet unlearned enthusiast. Miss Edith Wyncott, sole daughter of the lady of the house, a somewhat stately maiden of five-and-thirty, consoled herself with the photographic art as enthusiastically and lovingly as other maiden ladies console themselves with pugs or parrots. Dr. Elphinstone, the elderly gentleman whom we found a while ago arming his hostess across the lawn, was old enough to remember the beginning of the art,

and had watched its progress with a vivid interest. The world of science was indebted to him for a certain remarkable series of enlarged photographs of microscopic objects, so that he was a high authority.

It was the talk of these two which had persuaded Miss Pharr to occupy her leisure in photographic work, and the conversation was nearly all of wet processes and dry, of grey lights and white lights, screws, swivels, caps, and shutters. In the end, it grew too technical for the novice, and then she left the battle to the two authorities, and talked generally about the charms of the pursuit to Esden. It is not everybody in the world who could make a theme like this the means to display his own manly tenderness of heart, but Esden managed it. To have souvenirs of people and of places we have known or loved, not coldly bought for a shilling or two from a tradesman, but actually created by the labour of our own hands, must really be delightful. How charming, he urged, in solitude or age, to turn over the leaves of memory with such an aid as this beautiful art afforded! What a pleasant thing it would be to photograph, say, a child, month by month, until he grew to manhood, and to trace the gradual growth of intellect and strength in that way! The very

combatants stopped in their dispute to listen to him.

‘If I were a photographer,’ said Esden, ‘I should make a point of dating all my work ; not from any desire to mark my progress in the art, but from reasons purely sentimental. Think of the diary one could keep in such a fashion.’

‘That is really a valuable hint, Mr. Esden,’ said the heiress. ‘I shall adopt that suggestion, and I shall adopt it for that reason.’

Mrs. Wyncott sent Esden a meaning smile from her place at the head of the table, as if to say, ‘You are making excellent progress.’ Esden forbore to smile back in return, though it cost him something of an effort. The heiress looked at him with a grave and candid approval. She thought him a man of an admirable good heart ; and he, quite honestly and to his own surprise, began more and more to think her charming.

Elphinstone was a Scotchman, with a face like that of an unusually benevolent and sagacious old deerhound. Sir Walter’s pet, Maida, might almost have sat for his portrait. He was prodigiously solemn, even for his type, and his highest expression of humorous satisfaction was conveyed by a dry twitch and twinkle. He was grave about matters of the most ordinary import,

but where a thing concerned him at all his seriousness was abysmal.

‘Ye’re a very lucky pairson, Mess Janet,’ he said, with his gracious and amiable solemnity, ‘to have het upon a time for the commencement of your studies at a moment when the sci’nce o’ chemistry as applied to photography has so far pairfected itself. I began, for my own part, when ’twas en its enfancy. I remember pairfectly well the time when your late uncle brought over that wonderful collection of jools and gems, and chains and coins, and owches and brooches. He asked me to photograph them for’m. He was just new back from Burmah, and the *Art Journal* was all agog to have drawings of them. We had the thengs penned down upon a board, and I got them ento the loveliest light y’ ever saw, and I photo’d them. There was a mighty discussion at the time as to whether some of the coins were authentic, and all the numismatists in the wide wide warld took an enterest in the question. Well, I took the photos, and your uncle, being in a hurry, went straight back to Burmah with the oreginals. The pectures went from Edinburgh to London by the post, and were kept in the editor’s drawer for a month, and when the poor man went to hand them to the engraver, they’d just clean

flown. There was still a kind o' smutch upon the paper, but any notion of a picture they might have presented had vanished for guid and a'. There's no danger o' the like o' that happenin' nowadays, and the student o' photography may reckon himself happy in that he begins at a time when at least he'll be played no tricks with.'

The heiress laid her finger upon her lips, and looked across at the aged medico with an aspect of exaggerated secrecy.

'We will say more of this hereafter, Dr. Elphinstone,' she said. 'Remind me in the drawing-room.'

When dinner was over, Esden, who under ordinary conditions would have lingered for the enjoyment of a cigarette, had found the heiress so charming, and the beginning of his pursuit received so kindly, that he felt bound to follow her. When tea had been brought, and the servant who bore it had retired, Elphinstone reminded Miss Pharr of her promise.

'I know,' she said, with a delightful little mischievous grimace at the old gentleman, 'that I shall be scolded for bringing them here;' and without a word of further explanation she darted from the room in her own vivid and boylike way, and presently returning with a morocco-

bound despatch-box, laid it on the table and unlocked it with a key she carried at her girdle along with a multitude of miniature kitchen utensils in silver.

Dr. Elphinstone, leaning with both hands upon the table, made a long-drawn exclamation of wonder and delight as the box was opened. Esden was at the table already prepared to admire and wonder to precisely the extent to which wonder or admiration might be called for, and at the doctor's cry of surprise and pleasure the others gathered around.

'But, Janet!' cried the old lady. 'This is midsummer madness. How dare you carry such things about with you?' She stretched out a hand, and laid a forefinger, which positively trembled with her delight, on a huge half-cut sapphire lying in the centre of the case. 'What are they worth?' she asked, in a tone which contrasted comically in its eagerness and worship with her reproof.

'I can't tell you,' Miss Pharr answered. 'I dare say my uncle may have registered them at their full value. They were lying insured at the *Crédit Lyonnais* in Paris for half a million of francs. They were eating their heads off there, like unused horses in a stable. They were costing a thousand pounds a year for insurance. I

can stable them in England much more cheaply.'

Everybody about the table stared at the gems and coins as if they had been jewels in a fairy tale. The doctor touched them one by one with a reverent forefinger.

'I remember,' he said, with unusual solemnity. 'I remember.'

The case, which was no larger than a sheet of post-quarto, opened into two compartments, and in these, gems old and new lay enshrined in violet velvet, together with rings, coins, and chains of Oriental workmanship. The heiress deftly whipped out a tray in the lower section of the box.

'There,' she said, 'is the real treasure.'

The onlookers bent forward with craned necks and jostling shoulders, each unconscious of the others. The real treasure was less inviting to the eye than the one first seen. The gems displayed were for the most part rock-encrusted, but every one on the upper side had to a greater or smaller extent been cut and polished, so that they flashed with gleams of sapphire and emerald and yellow diamond light—a light furtive and concealed. The doctor drew an inward breath, and with extended thumb and forefinger touched one great stone, an emerald. Then looking at

the owner with an air of request and apology, he drew it from its place and laid it softly in the palm of his left hand.

‘I’m a little bet of an amateur,’ he said, in a half awe-struck tone.

‘That,’ cried Miss Pharr, laughing, ‘is quite a boast for Dr. Elphinstone. When he admits himself to be “a little bet of an amateur” — with an audacious mimicry of the old gentleman’s tone and manner—‘he means to say that he knows everything that can be known.’

The doctor turned upon her and twinkled.

‘May so old a gentleman as myself invite so young a leddy as you are not to talk nonsense? Janet, this is just wonderful!’ He stood poring over the jewel and watching its rich gleaming green for a minute, and then returned it reverently to its place. Then he stretched his white fingers over the collection as if he blessed it. ‘Eh?’ he said suddenly, as if someone had addressed him, and then in an inward murmur repeated the line, ‘Full many a gem of purest ray serene.’

‘Janet,’ said Mrs. Wyncott solemnly, ‘you must not keep these valuables in the house. I shall never be able to sleep so long as they are here. You will have us all murdered in our beds.’

‘There is not a soul except ourselves who knows that they are here,’ Miss Pharr responded. ‘I did not even mention them before the servants at dinner. Besides that, they are not the sort of thing a thief would care to steal. They are too remarkable to be easily disposed of.’

‘Pray don’t be too certain of that, Miss Pharr,’ said Esden. ‘I have encountered professionally a score of gentlemen who would willingly risk their necks for such a booty. And, as for disposing of them, there is an actual firm of receivers of stolen goods in London who are known to be ready, at almost any hour, with five thousand pounds.’

‘Wyncott Esden knows these things,’ said Miss Wyncott. ‘His profession brings him into contact with those dangerous people. You should really listen to his advice, Janet.’

‘Well,’ said Miss Pharr, looking up at Esden, ‘do you think it unwise for me to have them with me?’

‘I think it a little rash and hazardous,’ he answered.

‘But,’ said the owner of the jewels, with a momentary amused petulance, ‘you want to make them a sort of white elephant to me. What is the good of a girl having the things at

all if she is only to lock them up in a bank and pay for their being kept there?’

‘That’s a verra pointed query,’ said Dr. Elphinstone, ‘but I should be ill at ease with them if they belonged to me.’

‘I suppose,’ said Miss Pharr, replacing the tray which covered the more valuable gems, ‘that I may be allowed to keep my mother’s jewellery. And yet, to my mind, they are more dangerous than the others. You have only to wrench these stones from their setting, and nobody could identify them.’

‘Poor Robert would hardly have cared for the idea of the collection being dissipated, or I should counsel their being put upon the market,’ said Dr. Elphinstone.

‘That I shall never do,’ said Miss Pharr decisively. She closed and locked the casket. ‘In the meantime,’ she continued, laughing, ‘guard my dangerous secret. There is a very strong and snug little cupboard in my bedroom, and there they shall lie until I can find time to run up to town with them. Then they shall go to the bankers. Am I likely to encounter a burglar on the stairs?’

‘Janet, I beg you not to talk of such terrible things in a tone of levity,’ said the old lady. ‘It is a wanton tempting of Providence.’

There are some people who seem to think that Providence lies in wait for little opportunities of this kind. It is a disrespectful theory, and would seem to imply a capricious sort of vigilance at best.

Miss Pharr ran off with her jewels, locked them in the cupboard she had spoken of, and returned. Esden so manœuvred as to place himself with apparent naturalness at her side, and they had a bright and cheerful talk together. Every moment she grew more prepossessing to his fancy, and he began to think that if things went on at this pace there would be no need for pretences in a week's time from now. So far as he could judge—and he was neither outrageously vain nor a fool—the impression he made was as favourable as the one he received. He went to bed with a light heart, but the hapless J. P. haunted his pillow, and darkened his midnight hours until he went to sleep and dreamed of Miss Pharr and Golconda.

CHAPTER V.

ESDEN was rather a late bird for the country as a rule, but next morning the man had no sooner brought in his tub and shaving water than he bundled out of bed. Overnight, a photographic expedition had been arranged, and Miss Pharr was too eager to play with her new toy to suffer herself to be delayed by any late comer. Esden wanted to be helpful, and was naturally resolved to be profoundly interested in photography.

The man appointed to attend to his necessities had opened his portmanteau and stacked away his belongings with perfect neatness. He had not, however, opened the dressing-case, which closed with a snap lock, and that light task was left to the hands of the proprietor. Esden, growling a little at the delay, sought for the key, found it, and opened the case. There, at the bottom of the bag, to his considerable astonishment, lay the severed halves of Mr. Reuben Gale's curious souvenir.

‘Now, what the deuce did the old fool think I wanted that for?’ he asked, half aloud. ‘What on earth does she think it is, I wonder?’

He remembered having found it upon his pillow on going to bed on the night of his experiment with the door. He had unscrewed the tool, and set it on the chest of drawers, and there his laundress had obviously found it.

‘Thought it would come in handy, no doubt,’ he said, laughingly, as he applied the soap-brush to his chin. ‘So it would, with Miss Pharr’s jewels in the house. There’s a good joke there. I’ll take it down, and tell them the story.’

It crossed his mind that it would be a jest to pretend to have found it and to argue from it the presence of a burglar in the house; but he had too much wit to turn practical joker, and abandoned that idea before it was fairly formed. He was dilatory with his dressing, and the breakfast bell ringing before he was half ready for it put his discovery out of mind. He closed the dressing-bag with a snap, and had reached the foot of the stairs before he recalled the thought of the implement.

‘Never mind,’ he said to himself. ‘There’ll be more leisure for a story after dinner;’ and

so went down and encountered his hostess and his fellow-guests as brightly as he had left them ten hours before.

‘A letter for you, Wyncott,’ said the old lady. Esden took it from her hand and recognised J.P.’s superscription. He sat down and opened the envelope with the handle of an egg-spoon, and took out the missive somewhat jerkily. His correspondent wrote that he had heard news which had very much disturbed him. He had called at chambers for the purpose of talking it over, and the laundress, knowing their intimacy, had given him Esden’s address. Was that bill *really* all right? J. P. wanted to know. It was a matter of life and death to him, and the information he had received made him fear that it was doubtful. Would Esden wire?

The young barrister had hard work to conceal his annoyance. He wouldn’t have let that wretched J. P. in for this, so he told himself, for all the money in the world. Apart from the fact that it was really pitiful to damage so helpless a personage, it was disastrous to hurt a man of J. P.’s temperament, because everybody would know the injury he had sustained, and the cause of the trouble would inevitably have life made a burden to him. If it had not been

that the others were supplied with a theme in which they were warmly interested, the fall in Esden's spirits, and the sham gaiety with which he tried to mask it, would hardly have escaped notice. Confound J. P.! What had he got to howl about—as yet? Let him howl when the time came! Esden was righteously wrathful at the fact that J. P. would not accept his reiterated word.

Breakfast over, a council of campaign was held, and, everybody being entrusted with something to carry, the party set out with Miss Pharr's brand-new paraphernalia in search of landscape beauties at Wootton Wood. There, at an indicated spot, they were to be met by luncheon, and the three photographers at least were bent upon making a day of it.

They had scarcely reached their destination, and were all busily interested in working or watching, when the gardener's boy from the house came up, hot and breathless, with a telegram for Esden. This also came from J. P., and Esden, walking a little apart to open it, broke into maledictions on its sender, until he caught sight of the brown-faced boy at his elbow, staring aghast and open-mouthed at him. He had an impulse upon him to wring the boy's neck, but humour was his forte rather than ill-

temper, and he laughed instead. 'For heaven's sake, wire,' ran J. P.'s message, and Esden, tearing a blank leaf from his pocket-book, pencilled a message in reply. 'All right. Don't be an old ass.' He gave this to the boy with half a crown, and bade him take it to the post-office with all convenient speed.

'Be oi to bring back the chynge, sir?' the boy asked.

'No,' said Esden, 'you can keep it.'

The boy's face beamed, and he was off with a touch of his hatbrim. When he thought himself at a distance to be unobserved, he was seen to hurl his hat in the air, and to execute a wild flourish of delight with a pair of prodigious boots. Miss Pharr as well as Esden caught sight of him, and burst into a merry peal of laughter.

'You have gladdened one heart to-day, Mr. Esden,' she said, pleasantly.

This half-restored Esden's balance. It was worth while even to be badgered a little, if the badgering in any way helped to establish him in Miss Pharr's good opinion. But J. P. obstinately refused to be altogether got rid of. There were indeed moments when he seemed so vividly present, with that new moon of a nose of his and his half-opened mouth of resigned

complaint, that Esden loathed him, and could have willingly done him bodily injury if that could have helped the case.

With all this, it was his business to be unobtrusively helpful, and constantly interested in Miss Pharr's operations. The doctor and the maiden lady were full of advices, and were both itching to do the work themselves. The spot was a little Paradise for a landscape artist. Every change of posture, every half-dozen paces gave a new picture. Everybody in the party was grouped and posed repeatedly, and even when the operations were cut short by the arrival of luncheon, Miss Pharr's amateur enthusiasm was unabated, and her artistic appetite uncloyed.

The cloth was spread upon a little turfy table at the very edge of the wood, and the spot commanded a view of the house and of the winding path across the fields which led towards it. They were but halfway through the meal when Esden, glancing out of the shadow, gave an actual groan of impatience and rose to his feet. There was J. P.'s ramshackle figure on the pathway, and the gardener's boy was escorting him.

'What is the matter, Wyncott?' asked the doctor.

‘Here’s the deadliest bore in Europe,’ he responded. ‘He’s a client of mine, and a personal acquaintance into the bargain. He presumes on that to come and talk about his case to me. I won’t endure him. I shall send him back to his solicitor.’

So saying, he walked off to meet his unwelcome visitor, who, seeing him approaching, waved his stick in recognition, and fumbled in his pockets for a tip for the boy. He wore long-fingered dogskin gloves, and was by nature one of those clumsy-handed people who do nothing easily. He groped so long for the three-penny piece he wanted, that Esden came up with him just as he had found it. They both kept silence until the boy had accepted the coin and retired with a salute. .

‘Now, my dear fellow, what do you want here?’ Esden asked, in a tone of impatience.

‘Well, you see,’ mumbled the visitor, behind his nose, ‘you should have wired, Esden. You ought to have wired.’

‘Hang it all, man!’ Esden answered, ‘I did wire.’

J. P. took the air of one suddenly arrested, and stared at Esden with rounded eyes, and his mouth a little open as if he were making ready to bleat.

‘I never got it,’ he said feebly. ‘Where did you send it to?’

‘I sent it to the office,’ Esden answered. ‘I sent it immediately on receipt of -yours.’

‘Oh!’ said J. P., ‘that accounts for it. I didn’t go to the office this morning. I was waiting at home all day for an answer. What did you say?’

‘I said, “All right. Don’t be an old ass.”’ Esden laid both hands on J. P.’s shoulders, and gave him a cordial little shake. ‘You go home, old man,’ he said, calling up his brightest and most friendly smile, ‘and make your mind quite easy.’

‘Well, if you say that,’ J. P. returned dubiously, ‘it takes a weight off a man’s mind, of course. But they told me in the City last night that you were moving heaven and earth to raise a hundred and fifty, and it made me anxious.’

‘Now, look here, J. P.,’ said Esden, with a gentle severity. ‘I’ve written to you that it’s all right. I’ve wired to you that it’s all right. I’ve told you over and over again, speaking to you face to face, that it’s all right.’

‘Well—oh, of course, if you put it that way,’ said J. P., still dubious.

‘Don’t you fret,’ said Esden; ‘you shall never hear any more about it.’

J. P. said again that a load was taken from his mind, though he looked as if an added burden had been laid upon it.

‘You see, Esden,’ he mumbled in meek apology, ‘it would be an awful thing for me to have to meet it. Six girls, you know, all in perfect health, and such appetites you’d hardly credit. Then Mrs. P.’—it seems that she too was shorn of a whole surname like himself—‘is very ailing and weakly. We have had to take on another woman to look after the children, and the doctor’s bills are something awful. Of course, I must let her have the best assistance, and a good doctor is very expensive.’

‘I know, old chap, I know,’ said Esden, laying a hand upon his shoulder. At that moment his heart ached with compassion and repentance. ‘You shan’t be hurt, J. P. He would be a hard-hearted devil who’d damage you, old chap.’

‘Well, then,’ said J. P., ‘I *can* rely upon you?’

‘You can rely upon me,’ Esden answered.

He walked back with him towards the station, and had to seem high-spirited and easy of heart all the way. The poor J. P. went off

comforted, and Esden strolled back bitterly unhappy, and filled with an impotent loathing of himself. He had spoken one phrase in all sincerity. It was base indeed to hurt so harmless a creature. But how he could help it, and how escape the disgrace which seemed falling upon himself, he could not guess.

CHAPTER VI.

THE placid Mrs. Wyncott watched her impecunious nephew's progress with the heiress with a growing satisfaction. She was one of those people who believed that reformed rakes make the best husbands, which is at least as true as that pickpockets retired from practice are the most faithful of trustees. Esden had certainly been a bit of a rake in his day. Once the old lady had paid his debts for him, and there had been so pronounced a coolness on her side after this act of kindness, that Esden, who had natural and considerable expectations from her, had been compelled to pretend to a condition of financial prosperity which he was very far from enjoying. He had even gone so far, when he had grown quite sure of his aunt's forgiveness, as to offer repayment. The old lady had been very kind with him on this occasion, and had shed a tear or two over the returned and respectable prodigal. It was quite right, in her judgment, for a young man to sow his wild oats ; but she had a

strong impression, too, that the young man should reserve a special field for them, and should bring home some marketable harvest. Of her two nephews she had been used to prefer Arnold, but Arnold had gone into the Church. Mrs. Wyncott's father had been a pronounced Whig in the terrible old Nineties, and she had imbibed from him certain vague notions about the God-head of Reason, which left the Church respectable to her mind, but behind the age and a trifle feeble. A man with Arnold's figure should have gone into the Guards. She was a little parsimonious, but she had cared enough for him to find the money for that somewhat expensive and unprofitable career. He chose the Church in spite of her, and her affection for him cooled, until she began to like the scapegrace better than the clergyman.

There was an understood feud between her and her daughter Edith on this point. Edith was a devout Churchwoman, and reprobated mamma's freethinking opinions, vague and harmless as they were. Then the old maid—with that tender insight which unmarried women who have passed their **prime** unloved so often have—had penetrated a secret to which her mother was blind. Arnold was seriously in love with Miss Pharr, and was only frightened away

by the contemplation of her money. She held the key to another secret which needed no tenderness to discover. The money which drove the solider and worthier man away was the bait which drew his shallower and less deserving cousin. She liked Wyncott Esden—most people liked him—and she was not very severe in her judgment about him. But she esteemed the other man infinitely more highly. So, whilst mamma benevolently plotted in behalf of the barrister, Miss Wyncott took the cause of the clergyman in hand, and determined to do her best for him.

Miss Pharr and Esden and the old doctor were out photographing together, and the old lady was inwardly complacent at the prospect of the two young people being left much in each other's society. She had never dared to warn Edith out of the way, but she triumphed over the small stratagem which she believed to have kept her at home that morning. By-and-by, however, she discovered that there was another strategist on the field.

‘It looks very hot outside this morning,’ said the younger lady, *leisurely* plying her needle. ‘I am glad I stayed within doors.’

‘So am I, my dear,’ mamma answered comfortably.

‘It has given me an opportunity,’ said Miss Wyncott, ‘of writing to Arnold.’ Mamma dropped her book upon her lap, and folded her plump hands upon it with an expression almost of dismay. ‘I don’t know how it is that one’s hands seem so full always,’ Edith went on, with no admission of having noticed this change of attitude, ‘but one never seems to have time for anything.’

She went on stitching with downcast eyes, and the old lady, making her tone as tranquil as she could, asked ;

‘What did you say to Arnold?’

‘I told him we should be very glad to see him if he would come down.’

‘Edith!’ cried the old lady, with sudden shrillness.

‘Yes, dear?’ said Edith, looking innocently up at her.

‘For goodness’sake,’ exclaimed Mrs. Wyncott, ‘don’t take these airs with me. You know very well that I don’t want Arnold here at present. I don’t want any other young man than Wyncott about the house at present. I forbid you to send that letter.’

For sole answer, Miss Wyncott arose from her seat and rang the bell. Mamma fanned herself with a defined air of triumphant indignation,

and her daughter went back to her sewing. By-and-by, a servant appeared in answer to the summons.

‘Ask Grainger to come here,’ said Edith.

‘Grainger, Miss Wyncott?’ repeated the servant.

‘Grainger,’ repeated Edith, ‘Miss Pharr’s maid.’

There was another pause, and Mrs. Wyncott’s fan took a disturbed and doubtful movement. In a little while Grainger came, looking reserved and handsome, and as if under a sort of stately compulsion. She was dressed in discreet black, with white linen at the wrists and throat, and her lustrous black hair was rolled into a great knot. She looked as unyielding and disdainful here as she had done in Esden’s chambers a week earlier.

The younger lady did not so much as trouble to glance at her.

‘You have been to the village?’ she asked, in a tone of icy sweetness.

‘Yes, Miss Wyncott.’

‘Did you post the letter I gave to you?’

‘Yes, Miss Wyncott.’

‘Thank you. That will do.’

Grainger retired, closing the door behind her.

‘I am naturally very sorry, mamma,’ said Edith, ‘but you see it is too late.’

‘You have done this in order to spite me, Edith, and to thwart my plans,’ cried the old lady in an angry flutter.

‘Really, mamma,’ Edith responded, ‘you say the strangest and most unaccountable things. What plans of yours do I know of that could possibly be thwarted by Arnold’s presence here?’

‘Oh!’ responded the old lady, ‘I have no patience. You call yourself a Christian woman, Edith. I have no faith in you sanctimonious people. If there is any difference between telling a lie and acting one, I’m sure the difference is in favour of the telling.’ Edith sewed on contentedly. ‘How dare you try to face me out with a pretence that you knew nothing of my plans!’

‘Mamma,’ said Edith, ‘you will not forgive yourself for this outburst so readily as I shall.’

‘Fiddlestick!’ said the old lady. ‘If you succeed in spoiling what I am trying to do—and you know what I am trying to do as well as I do myself—I will never forgive you to the day of my death, and I’ll will every penny to Wyncott.’

‘I have my own modest competence, mamma,’ said Edith, with something almost saintly in her tone.

‘You may make the most of it,’ her mother

responded angrily. If she had been as young as her daughter, she would have left the room in a swirl of petticoats. As it was, she went off the scene with a sense of something wanting in the way of dignified rapidity.

‘Do not walk too fast, mamma,’ said Edith, with a readiness of pardon which completed the other’s exasperation. ‘You will only heat yourself, and be unnerved afterwards.’

Now this scene, coming on a proclamation of Miss Wyncott’s tender-heartedness, may seem to contradict it, but only for the superficial. If her mother had been but a hundredth part as distressed and annoyed about anything else in the world, she would have been sure of her daughter’s sympathy. But here was a love affair in which each had an interest, and Edith would have done almost anything to prevent her candidate from being jostled out of the running. She wanted a finger in that delicious love-pie which no man had ever baked for her eating. There was something almost pious too, a feeling of saintly satisfaction, in the thought that she might help to roll Miss Pharr’s thousands from the worldling’s track, and send them in the Church’s way.

As Miss Wyncott went on with her sewing, her thoughts turned, with a grave disapproval, on the accent and bearing of Miss Pharr’s new maid.

She had not liked the new maid from the moment of her arrival, but she had never liked her so little as in the brief interview of that morning. Grainger's manner had been undeniably haughty, and so long as domestic service shall continue as an institution, ladies will object to being treated *de haut en bas* by their friends' maids. The more Miss Wyncott thought of Grainger's manner, the less she liked it. Now, the fact was, that Grainger was by nature of a very sweet and serviceable disposition; but the expectation of Esden in the house had laid a chilling constraint upon her from the first, and on her way back from the errand upon which Miss Wyncott had despatched her, the girl had had an encounter of the most disturbing sort.

The house and the railway station were both on the high road, though at a considerable distance from each other, but the way to the village ran through a close-grown copse. Through the middle of this copse babbled a little runnel, not more than a foot wide in dry weather. The formation of its banks showed that in winter it could assume considerable proportions, but at the present season of the year the wooden bridge which crossed it looked disproportionately and even absurdly long. As Grainger approached this bridge she saw a gentleman lounging

moodily upon it, with his elbows on the rail, and a walking-stick dangling from one hand. She drew her skirts on one side, and quickened her step to pass him, for she was a town-bred girl, and the solitude, silence, and dimness of the little wood awed and frightened her more than a little. An unknown lonely street on a dark night would have had no such terrors for her as this quiet bit of woodland. When she was within six feet of the moody gentleman, he turned and assumed an erect posture so abruptly that she all but walked into his arms. She recoiled with an involuntary smothered cry.

‘Let me get by, Mr. Esden!’

‘You seem in a deuce of a hurry to get by,’ said Esden, looking at her with a face of *unusual* gloom.

‘I am in a hurry,’ she responded. ‘I am doing an errand for Miss Wyncott. Let me go by.’

‘You weren’t always in such a hurry to get away from me,’ said Esden.

‘I wonder,’ she answered, with an angry flash, ‘that you should have the face to speak about those times to me. I wonder’—and then on a sudden her voice began to quaver—‘that you can find the heart——’

Then, to Esden’s discomfiture, and some-

what to his amazement, she began to cry. She turned away from him to find her handkerchief, and, having found it, hid her face. Her sobs became almost convulsive, and her figure writhed as though she struggled with herself. He put his arm about her waist, intending to console her, but she sprang away from him and faced him, with the handkerchief clasped in both hands, and her face distorted with weeping.

‘You!’ she said, passionately. ‘Are you a man? What right have you to stop me here?’

‘I never thought you cared as much as this, Polly,’ said Esden.

‘What right have you to say I care?’ she asked. ‘You would have left me with enough to care for, if I had been the fool you thought I was.’

‘My dear,’ said Esden, ‘if you think that I’m the sort of brute to throw a woman over after getting all I care for, you’re very much mistaken. For my own part, I never thought that marriage was a part of the bargain. I never fancied it entered your mind to think so.’

‘When a man tells a girl he loves her,’ she answered, with a vehemence so passionate that she could hardly find words for it, ‘he either means marriage or he is a villain. Do you talk

to Miss Pharr as you used to talk to me? Do you dare to think about her as you had the impudence to think about me?’

‘Don’t talk about Miss Pharr, if you please,’ said Esden, sombrely. ‘I’m sorry that I hurt your pride. I’m sorry that we misunderstood each other.’

‘Hurt my pride?’ she said. ‘Hurt *my* pride? You hurt my pride in you. I thought you were a man. I thought you were a gentleman.’

‘Well, well, Polly,’ said Esden. ‘Let sleeping dogs lie. I beg your pardon. There! I’m very sorry.’

She disdained his offered hand, and he, shrugging his shoulders, turned and walked away with a more dejected air than ever. When she had been left alone for a little while, the girl, by a strong effort, suppressed her tears, and, climbing down the bank by the side of the runlet, steeped a part of her handkerchief in the clear, cool waters, and removed all traces of her late passion. Esden meanwhile strode up to the house on some slight commission which he had undertaken for Miss Pharr, and walking briskly, by mere force of motion cleared away for the moment—as men of his temperament can do—the troubles which lay upon his mind..

Next day Arnold ran down from town by an early train, and was received rather icily by the old lady. The younger lady was extremely warm on the contrary, and had never been so hospitable, and so cousinly affectionate in all his kindly remembrance of her.

Miss Pharr was still indefatigable in her enjoyment of the new toy, and the old doctor was her willing slave, as he had been from the time when she tyrannised over him in her babyhood. She was very deft-handed and quick to learn, and with so experienced a monitor constantly at her elbow, she made delightful progress. They had set up a tent upon the lawn, and were now bent on getting pictures of the house from half-a-dozen different points of view. Mrs. Wyncott, who sat reading in the tent at the moment of Arnold's arrival, was pleased to see that the heiress received him with a manner very different from that with which she had welcomed his cousin. Miss Pharr was a trifle shy with the young clergyman, and gave no sign of pleasure when she greeted him.

Arnold himself seemed not altogether at his ease, and the young barrister fluttered so assiduously about the heiress, that, but for Edith's attentions to him, the curate would have felt himself altogether in the cold. At

luncheon he was perforce taken into conversation, and there he dropped what turned out to be a sort of social bombshell, though he let it fall quite unawares.

‘Whom do you think I met in town last night, Wyncott?’ he asked, addressing his cousin.

‘That’s rather a wide riddle,’ Wyncott answered, lightly.

‘I met the Boomer. Boomer Brown.’

‘Never!’ cried Esden, starting from the table. He stood upright, with a flushed face, and cast a swift glance around the table. Then he turned pale, and sat down again, drawing up his chair behind him. ‘I beg your pardon,’ he said, with an odd catch in his voice. ‘I’d heard the Boomer was dead. Royce told me so. Arnold’s announcement,’ he added, turning to his aunt, and tapping his fingers upon his chest, ‘hit me rather hard. It was like seeing a ghost to hear it. I must go and see the Boomer, Arnold.’

‘You will have to be pretty quick about it,’ Arnold answered. ‘He’s off again to-night, I fancy.’

‘Off?’ said Esden. ‘Where?’

‘Back to Honduras.’

‘My dear aunt,’ said Esden, rising slowly

this time, 'I am sure you will forgive me, but this is a dear old friend of mine. I thought he was dead, and that I should never see his face again. I must run up to see him. You'll excuse me, won't you? We were at Cambridge together, the old Boomer and I. There isn't a better fellow in the world.'

He was very oddly moved, and everybody at table remarked it.

'Go by all means, Wyncott,' the old lady answered.

'You know where he's staying, Arnold?'

'Yes. At the Langham. He's there till six, I fancy.'

'All right,' said Esden. 'How do the up-trains go?'

'There is one due in a quarter of an hour, sir,' said the servant who waited at table. 'One twenty-five, sir.'

'I'll take that,' said Esden. 'I'll take a handbag with me in case I should be able to induce him to stay another night in town. I wouldn't miss him for the world.'

With that he left the room, and was heard racing upstairs, three steps at a time. Shortly he was heard racing down again, and when he thrust his head in at the door in passing he looked positively radiant.

‘If I’m not down by nine o’clock, don’t expect me to-night,’ he said, and disappeared, smiling.

‘Very well, dear,’ Mrs. Wyncott answered, but he was gone already. ‘Those affections between young men,’ the old lady added, turning to Miss Pharr, ‘are very beautiful to see. When you see that kind of feeling in a young man, you know what sort of a heart he has. Poor dear Wyncott! He was quite moved.’

That poor dear Wyncott had been moved, and deeply moved, was obvious to the poorest observer. But it was not his warmth and tenderness of attachment towards this casually-mentioned friend which had so excited him. The plain English of the matter was that the Boomer was not only one of the most generous and amiable men in Esden’s acquaintance, but beyond comparison the wealthiest. He had but to tell the story of his embarrassments to the Boomer to be lifted out of them. He could hear his friend’s noisy, cheerful voice booming at him in anticipation—‘Three hundred, my boy? Certainly. Make it five.’ It is not to be supposed that the Honduras millionaire had this agreeable and easy way with every old college acquaintance, but it happened that he had saved Esden from drowning once upon a

time, and from that moment forward had been as fond of him as if he had brought him into being.

To save that forlorn J. P.—to save himself—it was a glorious prospect! The summer sun had never shone more brightly for Esden than it did that afternoon. The broad earth laughed to his rejoicing fancy. He threw care to the winds, and sat like a king, with his thoughts for courtiers, as the train bore him slowly through the sleepy pastures. When he reached the terminus and hailed a hansom, he was so full of high spirits, that the very cabby grinned responsive to his smile, and rattled him along to the Langham with a solace for his own hard-bitten fancies.

At the portal blank midnight fell on everything. Brown was gone. He had taken the morning train, and had left no address behind him.

CHAPTER VII.

A LITTLE after luncheon Miss Pharr and the doctor went back to the lawn and resumed operations there. Mrs. Wyncott, who was still inclined to be chill with Arnold, followed them, and took up once more her place in the tent. Edith and Arnold remained behind for a time.

‘I see,’ said the maiden lady, ‘that you observed my signal. Sit down, Arnold. I want to have a serious talk with you.’

Arnold sat down obediently, and waited. Edith drew a chair pretty close to his, and laid a hand upon his arm.

‘I am quite old enough, Arnold,’ she began, ‘to take elderly sisterly airs with you. I don’t want to waste time in beating about the bush, and, above all things in the world, I hate hints and mysteries.’

With this preamble, she began to speak in parables.

‘There is a young clergyman, a friend of mine—in fact, a not very distant relative—who

came down here last year. There was a young lady here at the same time, and I have every reason to believe that she and the young clergyman were beginning to be very seriously attached to each other. All on a sudden the young clergyman discovered that the lady was going, one of these days, to be an heiress, and, being himself an absurdly Quixotic and high-minded boy, he ran away as soon as he could conveniently do it, and left the poor girl under the impression that she had somehow offended him. Now, if ever you should meet that young clergyman, Arnold, I want you to tell him that he behaved very foolishly and rather badly.'

'I happen to know something of the circumstances of the case,' Arnold answered. He was blushing like a girl, and kept his eyes fixed upon the pattern of the carpet. 'I happen to know that the young clergyman did the only wise and honourable thing he could do under the circumstances.'

'Did the young lady decline to listen to him?'

'No,' said Arnold, looking up for a moment. 'He never ran that risk.'

'Arnold, dear,' said the old maid, 'I think that he was very much in love with her'

'Please say no more about it,' said Arnold,

rising. 'If you asked me down here to say this to me I can't do less than thank you for it, because I know you meant it kindly. If that young clergyman had any dreams he awoke from them last autumn, and is not likely to go to sleep in those delusions any more.'

'But if there were no delusions?' the old maid answered him. 'Suppose the girl were wounded?'

'There is no ground to suppose anything of the sort,' he said, with such a brusque decision that she was more than half afraid of him.

'If I thought that,' she said, 'I should be a very foolish and wicked woman to put these thoughts into your mind. I believe she cares still, and I am quite sure that she did care a little less than a year ago.'

She was blushing now, and what with that, and a certain humid brightness in her eyes, she looked quite young again, and almost pretty.

'I knew a girl,' she said, half between laughing and crying, but wholly doing neither—'it is nearly twenty years since. A girl who would have given anything for somebody to do what I am doing now. But nobody did it, and the girl's an old maid, my dear. Not unhappy, very far from being unhappy, but not nearly, oh, not nearly, so happy as she might have been.'

Arnold stooped over her and kissed her, and she allowed her head to rest for a moment on his shoulder. Then she moved away, and having wiped her eyes with a transparent make-believe of complete self-possession she came back to him.

‘I shan’t mend my cause in that way,’ she said, ‘I shall only make you think that I am a silly and sentimental old woman.’

‘I won’t deny,’ said Arnold, looking away from her, and speaking with great slowness and deliberation, ‘that I had begun to have some fancies. I won’t deny even that the fancies carried me a long way sometimes. I never spoke of this till now to a soul,’ he interjected abruptly, turning his eyes upon her, ‘and never meant to.’

‘I am sure of that,’ said Edith.

‘I do not think,’ he went on deliberately again, ‘that Miss Pharr ever cared at all. I suppose a man may speak of these things without being a contemptible coxcomb. I had what seemed to me good grounds for believing that she did not care. But I should have tried my fortune if I hadn’t heard of hers.’

‘Exactly. Silly fellow!’ cried Edith. ‘I was sure of it all along.’

‘But a woman,’ Arnold went on, disregarding

her interruption, 'of her fortune, and with her worldly chances, can hardly be asked to bury herself in the East End of London, to live the life I live, and meet the people amongst whom I spend my days. I like my work so well that I won't leave it for anything in the world. I have no right to ask a delicately nurtured woman to share it. In plain English, my dear Edith, the only fault I have been able to find in the character of the lady whose affairs I am so impertinently discussing, is that she has been a little spoiled. What some women might endure with cheerfulness would be unbearable, even horrible, for her. Now let us go away and forget everything that has been said. That is the best thing we can do.'

She would have urged him further, but he was so very resolute and quiet that she forbore, being afraid that if she went too far she might draw him into some declaration from which he would be unable to retire. She was too good a diplomatist to risk a permanent defeat when she could escape with a temporary one, and so she accepted the situation with the best grace she could command.

They talked of commonplace things for a while, and then went out upon the lawn together.

‘It is unreasonable,’ Edith whispered to him as they emerged from the house, ‘to be as chilly as you were this morning. She will think she has offended you.’

This was not particularly subtle for a woman, but it was quite deep enough for Arnold, who fell headlong into the simple trap thus set for him, and straightway did his loyal best to be cordial. Miss Pharr thawed at once, and Edith, having established this preliminary footing, left them to their own devices. She joined mamma, whose manner seemed to refrigerate the atmosphere of the tent.

The elder lady dozed and the younger embroidered, for a sleepy hour or two. The trio on the lawn seemed to Edith to be engaged in conversation rather than in the manufacture of sun pictures; and once, pulling the canvas wall of the tent slightly on one side, she saw them all seated idly together in the shadow of a giant beech. Elphinstone’s Scottish drawl sounded from the distance at which he sat like the hum of a slow-going bee. He seemed to be entertaining his listeners rarely, for Miss Pharr’s ready laugh rippled pretty often across the leisurely hum of his speech. It was very hot indeed, and Mrs. Wyncott’s deep and regular breathing and the level murmur of the doctor’s

voice had so soothing an influence upon Edith's nerves that she herself was startled from a doze by the voice of one of the maids.

'If you please, miss,' said the maid, 'Miss Pharr sends me to ask if you would like to have tea served on the lawn.'

'Certainly,' she answered, waking up. 'By all means.'

The photographic apparatus was at work again, and this time the doctor had taken it in hand. Miss Pharr and Arnold were talking together with apparent naturalness and ease. So Edith feigned her usual interest in art, and crossed over to ask if she could be of service to the doctor.

'No, no,' said he. 'This is a little challenge from Janet yonder, and I'm engaged single-handed. It's a perfect light for open-air work. The materials ought to be of the best, and I'm going to try to give her an ideal picture.'

The two maids came out, carrying the one a table, and the other a tray, and a page boy in the rear bore the tea-urn.

'Get away there to one side,' said Elphinstone solemnly. 'Arrange your table yonder, oot o' my line o' sight, and let no one o' ye cross it till I give the word.'

The three domestics moved on stealthy tip-

toe, and Mrs. Wyncott, waking from her doze, appeared at the door of the tent with a sunshade. At the moment at which she stepped upon the lawn, 'click' went the shutter of the camera, and Elphinstone turned upon Miss Pharr with a bow of triumph.

'I think ye'll find that right, Miss Janet,' the old man said, twinkling his brightest.

'Very good,' said Miss Janet; 'and now for my turn.'

She set to work gaily, protesting that the light was fading, and that the conditions of the combat were unfair.

'And mind you,' she declared, pretending to a gravity equal to Elphinstone's own customary expression, 'I want that same perfect stillness which was *exigé*—what is the English word?—by you.'

'Ye shall have it, Janet,' said the doctor. 'Let no living creature presume to stir, on pain o' death.'

Straightway everybody went silent, and the domestics posed sheepishly, under the impression that they were about to have their portraits taken. The page boy's grin was ghastly, but the aspect of the country maids was not untouched by coquetry.

There was a pause of a minute or two, in

which Miss Pharr alone made any movement. She skipped hither and thither with a face of severe importance and determination. Finally the shutter of the camera clicked again.

‘Folks are once more at leberty to breathe,’ said the doctor, and all the pent-up stream of life moved on again. ‘Ye’re quite right, Miss Janet Pharr, in declaring that this is no fair competition,’ he added, twinkling again. ‘Ye’ve stolen my focus.’

Miss Pharr herself was already moving across the lawn towards the house, but she turned at this to wave a threatening forefinger at him.

‘Tea, Janet,’ cried Mrs. Wyncott.

‘Yes,’ she answered, dancing backward with both hands in the air. ‘I must wash my hands. Don’t wait for me. I’ll be down in a moment.’

With that, she turned and darted towards the house, and only a minute later, if so much, there was heard a most prodigious and unwonted shrill clatter of a bell, and then a clash of metal, which told that the bell itself had fallen upon the oaken floor of the hall. Almost before anybody could express a wonder as to what this might mean, Miss Pharr appeared at one of the windows of her bed-chamber, and seemed to struggle frantically to open it. When she had

succeeded, she thrust out her head and shoulders, and cried in an agitated voice,

‘Arnold! Edith! My jewels!’

Arnold, Edith, and the doctor all ran towards the house, leaving Mrs. Wyncott terror-stricken, and as if rooted to the lawn. Arnold was naturally foremost, and as he rushed upstairs he caught a momentary sight of a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl, with a face as white as marble. She was clinging to the jamb of the door at the entrance to Miss Pharr’s chamber, and she wore a look of awful terror. She and Arnold catching sight of each other at the same instant of time, she slipped swiftly into the room, and when he in turn entered she was standing before Miss Pharr.

‘My jewels!’ cried the heiress. ‘My jewels! They have stolen my jewels.’

The girl’s glance travelled slowly across the wall with such a look of being drawn by some horrible fascination that Arnold could but follow it. Before he could well decide at what she was looking, she gave a gasping cry, and fell prone upon the ground. Her head came in contact with the fender, and she lay like a corpse.

Miss Pharr, forgetting even her jewels for the instant, darted forward with a cry of dismay and knelt by the side of her maid. Arnold

wound his arms about the recumbent figure and lifted it. The girl's head fell back nervelessly as he did so, and at that moment the doctor entered the room with disturbed breath and hurried and ungainly gestures.

‘What’s this?’ he said pantingly. ‘Violence?’

He snatched two or three towels from the toilet-rail, spread out some of them upon the pillow of the bed, and assisted Arnold in laying down the unconscious figure. Then he dexterously undid the great knot of the girl's hair, and asked, business-like, for a sponge. Miss Wyncott, who had followed immediately upon the doctor's heels, began to scream hysterically at the sight of blood, and Elphinstone, turning to Miss Pharr, who stood pale and trembling by his side, said calmly :

‘Don't let Miss Wyncott do herself a damage, Janet. Take her away and keep her quiet. Send me a few large handkerchiefs and a pair of scissors.’

Janet obeyed. The two maids and the page boy were standing in the corridor in a frightened group, and as she passed them she gave one of them orders to wait upon the doctor.

‘Can I be of use, Dr. Elphinstone?’ Arnold asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Elphinstone. ‘You can hold

your tongue. Gi' me that basin o' water. Hold it so.'

The girl had fallen upon an almost knife-like edge of the polished steel fender, and had received a serious wound. It bled copiously, and for a time it was impossible to ascertain clearly its character and dimensions; but when one of the maids had brought the scissors Elphinstone had asked for, he shore away the great folds of hair, and examined the injury critically.

'What's this cry about the jewels?' he asked, when he had succeeded in checking the hæmorrhage by the application of a cold water compress.

'I know nothing,' Arnold answered, 'except that Miss Pharr declares them to be stolen. Are they of great value?'

'Value?' returned Elphinstone. 'They're worth betwixt thirty and forty thousand pounds. The patient 'll do for awhile,' he added. 'Here you, Harriet. Set ye down here, and give your friend a wheff of the salts now and again.'

'I suppose,' said Arnold, 'that this is the cupboard from which they were stolen.'

He and the doctor crossed the room together, and inspected the recess he indicated. The door of the cupboard lay upon the floor, and the framework, painted and varnished in imitation of ebony, stared white where the hinges had been

wrenched away. In the very centre of the framework on that side was a square flat bruise in the wood, and Arnold laid a finger on it.

‘Ay!’ said the doctor. ‘That’s where the lever went in. It took a strongish hand to do that piece o’ work.’

‘Well, sir,’ said Arnold, ‘we can do no good by standing here. It will be best to send a message to the police authorities in London without loss of time.’

‘I think you may take that upon yourself, Mr. Esden,’ the old man answered; ‘and if there should be any need for it, I’ll share the responsibility.’

So arranged, so done. Arnold ran full-tilt to the village post-office, and thence despatched a message—‘Within last few hours, jewels value thirty thousand pounds have been stolen from Hill House, Wootton Hill, Kent. Send experienced detective immediately.’

Until now, he had not had a second in which to think clearly, but as he walked slowly back, the horror-stricken face he had seen at the top of the stairs intruded itself upon his mind. The expression it had worn made it memorable, and it hung before his thoughts as a life-like pictured semblance of it might have hung before his eyes. Was it a face of guilt? he asked again and again,

and an undertone in his thoughts always answered 'No.' Yet, apart from guilt, he could discover no reason for the monstrous agitation under which the wearer of such an expression must have laboured. He wondered if a woman's hand could have wrenched the door away, or if the maid might have been an accomplice in the act. In his excited thoughts he felt a sort of pity for her beforehand, a pity both for her guilt and for its inevitable discovery, even whilst he admitted that he had no reasonable ground for suspecting her.

In this frame of mind he reached the house. He found everybody unexpectedly tranquil there. The old lady, her daughter, Miss Pharr, and the doctor, were all gathered together awaiting his return. They were all very quiet, and the three ladies wore something of an awe-struck air.

'Ye'll have your jewels back again, Janet,' said Elphinstone, when Arnold had recited his message, 'it's a thousand to one.' The discovery happened too close upon the theft. 'It appears'—he turned upon Arnold with this intelligence—'that one o' the maids was in Miss Pharr's room ten minutes before she herself went up. Everything was in order then, and so the thief had no great time to get to any distance. They'll lay hands upon him, never fear.'

‘And some poor wretch,’ cried Janet, ‘will be sent to prison through my pride and folly. I would a thousand times sooner have lost them in any other way.’

‘Ma, dear,’ said the old doctor, soothingly, ‘that’s just a piece of tender-hearted nonsense. If a man can’t refrain himself from knocking me on the head because I’ve a purse in my pocket and a watch in my fob, there’s not the least little bit o’ moral obliquity in my carrying them, and the scoundrel that has that murderous envy of them has got to be put away for the safety o’ society.’

But Janet was not to be consoled by this obvious social philosophy, and was in genuine and deep distress at the result of her own rashness. Mrs. Wyncott and Edith alike forebore to upbraid her, though the temptation to say, ‘I told you so,’ burned in the soul of either.

‘Now, ladies,’ said Elphinstone, ‘in the natural excitement of the time, the five o’clock has been forgotten. I’m not going to have three patients on my hands, and I’ll just take the liberty of ordering tea. That on the lawn will be cold and useless by this time.’

Nobody dissented, and tea being ordered and brought, they sat sipping it in a doleful silence, when a sharp ring at the hall bell startled the

ladies into a simultaneous exclamation. They had scarcely calmed themselves when one of the maids appeared.

‘A gentleman from Scotland Yard, ma’am. Mr. Prickett.’

CHAPTER VIII.

THE doctor rose to his feet and ran out into the hall, and there upon the doormat stood a stranger, who nursed a very lustrous silk hat tenderly by the brim, and examined the hall as if he were a builder with a contract to erect another on a similar pattern.

‘Mr. Prickett?’ said the doctor, as he advanced towards him.

‘The same, sir,’ Prickett answered.

‘Ye’re here before ye were expected. I had not anticipated so much despatch.’

‘I happened to be at the Yard when the telegram came in, and I found a train at Charing Cross in a quarter of an ~~hour~~.’

‘I’m very glad ye’re ~~here~~,’ returned Elphinstone. ‘Come this way, and I’ll introduce ye to the lady that owns the stolen property.’

Mr. Prickett followed him into the drawing-room, and distributed four crisply amiable nods.

‘Good afternoon, sir. Your servant, ladies.

Mr. Prickett had one peculiarity—a calmly

wandering glance, which appeared to be governed by system. It travelled over every article in the room, lingering nowhere, and missing nothing, and in the same quiet fashion touched every face, and every detail of costume and personal adornment.

‘This is Miss Pharr,’ said the Doctor, ‘the owner of the jewels.’

‘Could have wished,’ said Mr. Prickett, with perfect respectfulness, ‘to have met Miss Pharr under pleasanter circumstances.’

‘Will you take a seat, sir?’ said the old lady. ‘A most dreadful thing has happened, and I am sure that though one reads of them in the newspapers they never really come home to one’s feelings until——’

‘Exactly, madam,’ Mr. Prickett interposed. ‘That is the general experience. Now, suppose, sir, to begin with, I was to be allowed to ask a question. Have you got anything to show me? Is there any breakage?’

‘I must show this gentleman to your chamber, Miss Pharr,’ the Doctor said, half apologetically.

‘We’ll go with you,’ Janet responded.

‘The fewer the better,’ said Elphinstone. ‘Ye mustn’t forget that Grainger lies hurt there. That’s a matter that may concern ye to know, Mr. Preckett,’ he continued, as he led the detec-

tive from the room. 'I'll explain it later. I'll ask ye to tread softly, and not to talk in the chamber unless it's needful.'

The room reached, Elphinstone signalled the breakage by a mere motion of the forefinger, and the other, approaching the cupboard on tiptoe, scrutinised the fractures closely. Next, he picked up the door, which lay where it had fallen, and having examined that in turn, laid it down and stole out noiselessly. The two returned to the drawing-room, and the detective, politely waiting until the old gentleman was seated, resumed his place.

'There's one thing certain, ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'It's no professional work. Amateur, I should call it, and clumsy for that. Hopelessly amateur. The next thing is as near as may be to fix the time when it was done.'

'It was done,' said Arnold, 'between ten minutes to five and five o'clock.'

'Come,' said Prickett, turning his calmly observant eye upon him. 'That's something, sir. How might you have come to know that?'

Arnold, it appeared, had consulted his watch at the moment at which Miss Pharr left the lawn. The maid who had last entered Miss Pharr's bedroom could fix the hour with almost equal

accuracy. Tea had been ordered for five o'clock, and she had noticed the time before going upstairs.

Within the space of a quarter of an hour Mr. Prickett, by dint of judicious inquiry, had made himself acquainted with the name, age, and antecedents of every domestic employed in or about the house. Butler and cook were man and wife, and had gone away that morning by their mistress's permission to attend a wedding in the neighbouring village of Hemsleigh. The two maids and the page-boy had been upon the lawn for the greater part of the fateful ten minutes. The only person known to have been in the house during that time was the maid Grainger, and she at present was not in a condition to be interrogated.

'I altogether refuse to suspect Grainger,' Janet said warmly. 'Her parents are most respectable people, and she was highly recommended to me by Lady Hilton.'

'Well, don't you see, miss,' said Mr. Prickett persuasively, 'it's only fair to the young woman that the circumstances should be inquired into. What we've got to do is to clear the poor thing's character. It might be flung in her face in ten years' time, as she was the only young person known to be in the house when this job was

done. Where might she be supposed to be if she was in the house at the time?’

‘She would probably be in her own bedroom,’ Janet answered.

Learning that the maid’s bedroom was in the same corridor with Miss Pharr’s and nearly facing it, Mr. Prickett mused awhile.

‘That there black oak flooring,’ he said, ‘is very talkative. I noticed that myself. She’d be likely to hear anybody as went by. Suppose she did that, she might ha’ put two and two together when she heard about the robbery, and that might be what frightened her. You see, miss,’ added Mr. Prickett, with a saponaceous smoothness, ‘if she said to herself, “Now, that’s a stranger’s footstep, and I ought to go out and see who’s there!” and then if, on top of that, she said to herself, “Rubbish! It’s broad daylight, and I’m getting nervous,” that might account for her tumbling down in such a startling way when she heard as the jewels was gone.’

Janet accepted this solution with warmth, and began to think highly of Mr. Prickett’s powers of discernment. But that wily personage had noticed that the mistress was disposed to take up the maid’s cause in something of a partisan spirit, and was simply smoothing his way for future inquiries. ✱

At his own request he was allowed to inspect all possible means of egress and ingress, and, still with a view to clearing Grainger's character, was permitted to overhaul her belongings. Finding nothing which was of the slightest service to his inquiry, he returned to the drawing-room, and gave a judicial summing up of the case.

'Now, ladies and gentlemen,' he began, 'this is what it comes to. So far as we know at present, the two Miss Wades, the young ladies visiting here at the time and since gone away, Mr. Wyncott Esden, barrister-at-law, absent all afternoon in London, and the present company (with the exception of this reverend gentleman), was the only people aware of the existence of this valuable property. It seems that all of you was allowed to know where the jewels was kept, and, so far as you can tell, nobody else knew a word about it. It seems further,' he continued, with a quiet legal relish, 'as on the evening when the jewels was shown the lamps was lighted, and this window, which I notice to be a French window, opening all the way down, was open. The value of the jewels was talked about, and maybe the talk was overheard. Maybe again, somebody broke confidence, and spoke about the things. All these considerations has got to be looked at. It's a great pity as we can't have

a bit ~~of a talk~~ with this young woman. She might throw a light on the case. I understand you, sir, to be a medical gentleman, and, so soon as you give me leave to do it, I must ask her a question or two.'

'I'll see her at once,' said Elphinstone.

'I'm sorry,' resumed Mr. Prickett, when the Doctor had gone away, 'very sorry, as Mr. Wyncott Esden chanced to be absent when this thing occurred. I've had the honour of being professionally associated with Mr. Wyncott Esden on one or two occasions, and I don't know a smarter gentleman at the bar. These sort of things is like everything else in one respect. Amateur work is pretty nearly always loose, and that isn't so true of anything as it is of amateur observation. With a trained mind on the spot an hour before I got here—Lord! you don't know what it *might* ha' done. Where could the thief ha' got to in ten minutes' time? Why, Mr. Wyncott Esden would ha' been at the railway stations in the neighbourhood. He'd ha' been down to the local police, he'd ha' made inquiries about suspicious strangers, and might ha' laid hands on the man before he could ha' got five miles away by train. Between the time that job was done and now, ladies, six trains has left this neighbourhood, two east, and one west at

Hemsleigh Junction, and two down, and one up at Wootton Hill. You mightn't ha' wanted me if Mr. Wyncott Esden had been here on a hot scent like that.'

Even in her agitation and distress the old lady experienced a momentary gratification as Mr. Prickett chanted the praises of her favourite nephew. She was glad that Janet should hear them. Mr. Prickett's speech helped to show the high consideration in which Wyncott was held by those who were in a position to appreciate his talents.

Whilst Prickett was still talking, the doctor returned, with his ordinary expression of gravity increased tenfold.

'Ye can see the gyurl, Mr. Preckett,' he said, 'but I'm sorely afraid ye'll make nothing out of her. Ye'd better come upstairs with me at once. Ye'll have to be very quaiet and soothing with her,' he added, turning upon the detective when they were halfway upstairs together. 'It's only in view of the extreme importance of the case that I allow ye to see her at all.'

'You can trust me, sir,' responded Prickett. 'I shan't frighten her. That's no part of my business.'

One of the servants sat by Grainger's side nursing a bottle of smelling salts with a vague

air of business. The doctor dismissed her with a word. Grainger was seated in an armchair by the window in an attitude altogether listless and feeble. Her tumbled hair and the white bandage about her head gave her a somewhat ghastly look, and her large dark eyes followed the movements of her visitors with a solicitude which was at singular variance with her aspect of bodily fatigue.

‘This is a gentleman,’ said Elphinstone, bending over her gently, and speaking with such a slow distinctness as he would have employed in addressing a foreigner who was but imperfectly acquainted with English—‘this is a gentleman who has come down from London on purpose to make inquiries about the event of this afternoon.’

Grainger looked from the Doctor’s face to Prickett’s, and back again with what seemed to both of them like a despairing challenge.

‘You seem to have had rather an ugly accident,’ said Mr. Prickett soothingly. ‘Now, don’t you go and over-exert yourself. I just want to ask you a question or two, and if you don’t feel strong enough to be talked to now, why, I’ll come up again in the morning. Now, did you happen, miss, to see anything, or hear anything, that gave you a bit of a turn?’

Grainger answered with a look of dreadful eagerness; but her speech was altogether unintelligible, a mere collection of inarticulate sounds. She seemed to read in Prickett's face the fact that she was not understood, and glanced from him to the Doctor.

'Now,' said Elphinstone, 'ye're suffering from a very considerable shock. Ye're not to agitate yourself, but ye don't speak plainly. Just try again. Very slowly, and as destenctly as ye can.'

She spoke again, the same incomprehensible brash of syllables. Prickett looked at the Doctor with a little incredulous shake of the head; but Elphinstone warned him with a forefinger, and, producing a note-book from his pocket, opened it at a blank page, and laid it in the girl's hand.

'Just write that down for us,' he said, offering her a pencil.

She looked wonderingly at him, and then, taking the pencil, wrote slowly and painstakingly, like a child who is just learning to form letters. When she had finished, the Doctor took the note-book, and after a glance at it handed it to Prickett. The two lines she had written ran thus:—

'D gha wn nt tuldvrn rtt tle mire vbt hemtt buturng.'

The officer's opinion was that the girl was shamming, and he wondered at the Doctor's patience and gentleness.

'I'll not trouble you to talk any more,' said Elphinstone. 'Just give me a sign, yes or no. Were you in the house when Miss Pharr rang her bell?'

The maid signalled 'Yes.'

'In your own bedroom?'

She signalled 'Yes' again.

'D'ye think ye'd been there for the last ten minutes?'

The signal was repeated, this time with energy.

'More than that?'

'Yes.'

'Did you hear any sounds of footsteps, or any sound of breaking wood, or anything to excite suspicion?'

A decided shake of the head in answer, accompanied by a look of terror.

'There's nothing to be done at present,' said Elphinstone, and Prickett followed him obediently from the room, though he cast a glance or two at the girl in retiring.

'That's a pretty shallow style of humbug, ain't it, sir?' he asked, turning on the Doctor in the corridor.

‘It’s a not uncommon, but very obscure form of nervous disorder,’ said Elphinstone, ‘and, as far as I can judge at present, a case o’ great deffeculty. It’s a case o’ severe nairvous shock, resulting in a complication of agraphia and aphasia.’

‘You don’t think the young woman’s shamming, sir?’ asked Prickett.

‘I’m sure she’s not. The cleverest actress in the world couldn’t sham it.’

‘Would you mind giving me those names again, sir?’ The Doctor repeated the words to him, and Mr. Prickett whispered them thoughtfully to himself as he walked downstairs, ‘aphasia, agraphia, agraphia, aphasia.’

‘Do you think it’s likely to last long, sir?’ he asked. ‘That girl knows something. She’s got something on her mind.’

‘The disorder’s not often pairmanent,’ said Elphinstone, ‘when the pashint’s under forty, and can both read and write, but how long it may last is just beyond any man’s saying. Ye must wait, my man.’

Arnold and the three ladies waited anxiously in the drawing-room, but the Doctor as yet said nothing of the maid’s condition, beyond remarking that she was not in a state to be closely questioned.

‘I suppose,’ said Prickett, ‘that the village police know all about the case?’

‘No, sir,’ returned the Doctor. ‘We’ve refrained ourselves from troubling the lockle-yockle.’

‘The what, sir?’

‘The local yokel, sir,’ returned Elphinstone, with an almost angry distinctness. ‘The one member of the ceevil force in Wootton Hill might make a decent gatepost if ye planted him, though, if he’s good for any other mortal theng, his Maker has seen fit to make a mystery of it. Ye remember, Arnold, that pony o’ mine—but I’ll not talk o’ that at a time like this. I’ll swear ’twas that jepsy tinker blackgyard that stole ’m, but yon ox went off on a false scent, and—I’ll not talk about a loss like that at such a time.’

‘I’d better see the man, sir,’ said the detective. ‘He’ll be able to tell me if any strangers have been hanging round, perhaps; and while I’m away, miss, there’s one thing you can do as will be of the greatest value. I shall want you, if you please, to draw up as full and complete a description of these here gems as you can manage.’

‘Oh!’ cried Janet, ‘I can give you everything about them at once. My uncle had a catalogue of the jewels printed only a few

months before his death. I have quite a number of copies, and you can have as many as are necessary.'

'That's lucky,' said Prickett. 'I'll take four of 'em, if you please—one for myself, one for the Yard, and one apiece for the two big Press Agencies.'

Mrs. Wyncott made an exclamation of dismay.

'Dear me! Will it get into the newspapers?'

'Why yes, ma'am,' returned Mr. Prickett, 'and a very good thing too. Every pawnbroker in the country, every honest dealer in gems, and every lapidary who works on the square, all England through, will be on our side to-morrow, and on the look-out for the thief. If you'd kindly let me have the catalogues at once, I'd send three of 'em up to town by the guard of the next train.'

Janet tore upstairs, and returned in a minute or two breathlessly, bearing a number of pamphlets in her hand.

'I suppose,' said Prickett, taking up one of them and glancing over its contents, 'that this doesn't include a description of your personal jewellery, miss?'

'No,' said Janet eagerly. 'But I can write that out for you.'

‘Do, if you please,’ he answered. ‘That’s likeliest to be offered first. In fact, that may be in the hands of the pawnbrokers already, just dropped here and there, in little parcels like. And now, sir,’ turning gravely upon the Doctor, ‘if you’d be so good as to direct me, I’ll take a look at the local yokel.’

Arnold undertook to guide him to the police station, and the two set out together.

‘You take no notes?’ said Arnold, more for the sake of saying something, than because he was interested.

‘Well, as a matter of fact, sir,’ responded Mr. Prickett, ‘a man in my line has got to spend his time in taking notes, but I don’t find as I need trouble to write ’em down.’

‘Don’t you find that your memory betrays you sometimes?’

‘No,’ said Prickett, reflectively, ‘I don’t think it ever did, sir. The major part of people ruins their memories with reading novels, and songs, and trash. There’s a chap at the Yard as can recite by the hour. I should think as he knows Lord Byron from beginning to end, but his head’s that full of that kind of tack there’s no room in it for anything else. You tell him what time a train starts, tell him what complexion a man’s got, tell him what height he is, show him the

plan of a building. If he don't write down what you tell him he'll be in a fog about it in twenty minutes. Many's the time I've told him: "If you'd leave the wheels inside your head-piece free to act, you'd make a first-rate officer, but you clogs 'em up with all them treacly verses, and what d'ye expect?"

'Do you never read at all, then?' asked Arnold, beginning to be interested.

'Criminal cases,' responded Mr. Prickett. 'Law reports. Takes a look at the advertisements in the "Daily Telegraph" sometimes. Ye see, sir,' he continued, growing suddenly warm and confidential, and laying a gloved forefinger lightly on his companion's arm, 'all day long the inside of a man's head is like a piece of machinery in motion. It's bound to go, and it must have something to work at. Now, when I went into the force, sir, I made up my mind as I wasn't going to stop on the bottom rung of the ladder all my life, and I says to myself, "Now, what's the first thing wanted to make a tip-top officer?" I wasn't long in making up my mind. He's got to be notice-taking more than any other man alive, and he's never got to forget any person or any thing as he's once set eyes on. When I was on duty in the Strand—I was there for the best part of three years—I used to prac-

tise myself watching faces in the street. I spotted a man only yesterday that I see go by me seven years ago. I never see him before nor since, till yesterday, and I could ha' picked him out among a million. You tell that to some folks, and they'd think it was a lie, but it's just as true as gospel. Leave books alone, keep your head clear and your eyes open, and when you look at a thing, *look* at it. That's the secret, if there is one.

'Don't you think, sir,' continued Mr. Prickett, who had evidently mounted his pet hobby—'don't you think as I'm such a fool as to despise book learning. If I should live to be old-aged, and can afford the time, I mean to have a real burst at it, but just now I've got my way to make, and I can't afford it.'

'I suppose,' said Arnold, 'that you don't mean to say that you never forget anything you have seen?'

'Well, no, sir,' returned the theorist, 'I don't say that, of course. But I never forget anything I've looked at. You'll notice, sir, that most people see things without taking the trouble to look at 'em, and so they don't rightly remember the things as ought to be most familiar. Now, for instance, sir, you ought to know that room we've been sitting in a good deal better

than I do. I'm not bragging, but I'll bet you don't.'

'Well,' said Arnold, 'let us see.'

'Carpet,' said Prickett, as if he were dictating an inventory to a shorthand clerk—'Brussels, whitish ground, sprinkled with largish roses. Wall paper same shade as carpet, diamond pattern in dull gold. Facing door, water-colour: girl crossing stream on stepping-stone, making signs to little chap on bank. Over door, water-colour: old gentleman, knee breeches, reading book in a wood. Twelve chairs, various—four easy, three spider-legged, in gold. Little round-topped table near window, microscope on it, and a bracket full o' books: Tennyson's poems, green and gold, seven vollums; "Imitation of Christ," white vellum, gold letters; foreign book in a yellow cover, don't know the name; "Leaders from the *Times*," two vollums, name of Phillips. Little cabinet in the corner, seven drawers, key in the middle drawer, basket of flowers and lady's photo on top. Chimley ornaments Dresden china, stag with antlers caught in a tree, left antler broke——'

'I will not compete with you, Mr. Prickett,' said Arnold.

The sun had fallen behind the hill by this time, and the whole landscape before them lay

in the gentle and equable light which was reflected from the eastern skies. Everything was so still that the sounds of life in the yet distant village were clearly audible—the crack of a carter's whip, his long-drawn cry to his team, the very tramp of the horses and complaining of the creaking wheels. A hundred yards away, beyond the turning of the road, there was the sound of a swift but equal footstep, and as they neared the turning Wyncott Esden rounded it, walking rapidly, and swinging a black dressing-case in his hand. Seeing them, he checked his footsteps for a mere second, and then came on again.

‘Hillo, Prickett,’ he said, in a hearty voice, ‘what brings you in this part of the world?’

CHAPTER IX.

THERE was a low stone wall running by the side of the road, and Wyncott, hearing the news, put out his hands towards it as if he felt he needed its support. For a second he glared rather wildly from his cousin to the detective, and then tilting back his hat and passing his hand across his forehead, recovered himself from his amazement.

‘That’s pretty bold work,’ he said, ‘isn’t it, Prickett? You’ve had more experience than I have, of course, but I never heard of anything like it. You have lost no time, either.’

‘Well, no, sir,’ said Prickett, mildly. ‘I don’t let the grass grow under me oftener than I can help.’

‘You’ll make any use of me you can, Prickett,’ said the barrister.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Prickett. ‘I shall be very pleased to have your help, sir.’

He sketched briefly what had been learned already, and Wyncott listened keenly.

‘Well, now,’ he said at the end of Prickett’s statement, ‘let us divide our forces. You go and question Dodge, and I’ll go back to the railway station and make inquiries there. Or, look here, Arnold, you go to the station here, and I’ll walk over to Hemsleigh and make inquiries there. It’s a pity these things weren’t done at once. By this time the thief may be in Birmingham, or at Dover. You never saw the case in which the jewels were held, did you? It was about the size of a sheet of large post quarto, and four, or perhaps five, inches in depth. A man couldn’t carry it about under his coat without bulging suspiciously. He might carry it openly, or he might carry it in a bag, or he might carry it like a commonplace newspaper parcel, or rolled up in a coat, or in any one of fifty ways. The main thing is a stranger with a parcel, by the first train he could possibly catch after five o’clock. You might put the station master on to make inquiries at the next two or three stations each way. I’ll do the same at Hemsleigh. Now, where shall we meet again?’

‘I left my bag at the “Angler’s Rest” as I came along,’ said Prickett. ‘Pleasant-looking little sort of house. Perhaps you might meet me there, gentlemen, when you’ve made your

inquiries. If you will allow me, Mr. Esden, I'll leave your bag there.'

'All right,' said Esden, surrendering it. 'I'll be back in an hour. I shall expect to see you there too, Arnold.'

He was off at a swift and resolute pace, and Prickett stood for a moment to look after him.

'That's the exact line I told you, sir,' he said, 'that Mr. Wyncott Esden would have taken in a minute if he'd been on the spot. That's the line that ought to have been taken.'

'I suppose it is,' Arnold answered, somewhat despondently.

'Oh, I shouldn't think, sir,' said Prickett, 'of blaming *myself*, if I was you. That sort o' thing doesn't come in your line, sir; and you don't seem to have lost a minute in getting the news off to the Yard. It was hardly to be expected as you should start an inquiry on your own account.'

From the moment when Prickett had first suggested Wyncott's probable lines of action, Arnold had blamed himself for not adopting them, but every man's experience is full of memories of lost opportunities. When it is too late to do a thing it is irritating to see how obviously it ought to have been done. The young clergyman went off crestfallen to his talk with

the station master. Neither he nor Prickett found anything which could be of advantage to their quest, and when Wyncott joined them he had the same story of a blind trail.

The detective had ordered dinner for himself, and was engaged with a perfect philosophic phlegm over a round of cold boiled beef and a jug of home-brewed ale.

‘That looks appetising, Prickett,’ said Wyncott. ‘I think I’ll join you.’

‘The pickles, sir,’ said Mr. Prickett, exploring the pickle-jar in search of a chosen morsel, ‘is excellent. Country-made pickles is always the best, except when the yokels takes to boiling ha’pence with ’em to make ’em green.’

‘I’ll join too,’ said Arnold, ‘I am hungry, and we shall save them trouble at the house. Dinner is over there by this time, if they have had heart to take it.’

The three sat and ate together, until Wyncott, suddenly pushing his plate away, began to pace up and down the room.

‘Prickett,’ he said, ‘I have an idea. I think it very possible that we may get the stolen property back again.’

‘That’s a thing to be wished for,’ said Prickett, tentatively.

‘Miss Pharr’s private jewellery,’ said Esden,

‘might pawn, perhaps, for a couple of hundred pounds. I’m not much of a judge in such matters, but I’ve seen it, and I don’t think it is likely to have cost more than six hundred when it was bought. There are a lot of rare coins in the case which are almost priceless to people who know their value, but there isn’t fifty pounds’ worth of metal in the collection. Every one of them is famous, more or less, and they’re only good as old gold to the thief. The gems are all uncut, and to take them to a lapidary, so as to fit them for the market, would be tremendously risky and expensive. The lapidary would certainly want to go shares, and then you know what gems in dishonest hands go for when they come to be sold.’

‘That’s how I always look at thieving,’ said Prickett, picking his teeth with a penknife, and reclining in his chair with an air of after-dinner contentment. ‘It’s a depreciation of the value of property. If I was a thief I shouldn’t steal nothing but sovereigns. It’s a dreadful loss to the party robbed, and it’s the smallest possible gain to the thief. It’s a poor game. I always come to the conclusion that if a man does it he’s got a hole in his intellect somewhere. Show me a thief, and I’ll show you a born fool. Any way, it’s a trade as no man o’ sense ever stopped in.’

‘Well, now,’ said Esden, who had endured this interruption patiently, ‘it seems to me that if this theft has not been committed, as it may have been, in the hope of a thumping reward, a reward may at least persuade the gentry who are in it to return the property.’

‘That looks a bit like compounding a felony, Mr. Esden,’ said Prickett.

‘Well, yes,’ Wyncott admitted. ‘It does, a little. What did you tell me,’ touching Prickett lightly on the shoulder—‘what did you tell me was Dr. Elphinstone’s estimate of the value of the gems?’

‘Why, sir,’ returned Prickett, ‘he reckoned the whole boiling of ’em at between thirty and forty thousand pounds.’

‘Call it thirty,’ said Esden. ‘Take the lower fork of the estimate, and call it thirty. If you were in Miss Pharr’s place, do you think that your sense of public duty would be strong enough to prevent you from saving nine and twenty thousand? Eh?’

Mr. Prickett smiled slowly.

‘Well, sir,’ he said, ‘perhaps it wouldn’t. I don’t know as I should be going too far if I was to say as my sense of public duty might go to pieces afore an economy a quarter of that size. That isn’t the Yard doctrine, as you know,

Mr. Esden, but simply speaking like a mortal man.'

'Precisely,' said Esden. 'But the authorities couldn't object to a reward of a thousand pounds being offered.'

'Of course not,' Prickett answered. 'In a case like this a thief has got to trust a lot of people, and the bigger the reward, the likelier some one of 'em is to round on him. A thousand's a bit too much, though. Five hundred would work it.'

'Five hundred might induce an accomplice to split,' said Wyncott, 'but a thousand might tempt the thief himself. Miss Pharr's chief anxiety will be to have the jewels back again. Of course this is all between ourselves, Prickett. We're talking like men of the world now, and not like a pair of professional thief-catchers. I haven't had a chance of speaking to Miss Pharr, but I'm pretty certain that that is what she desires, and if I were you,' said Esden, with a return of his old sly smile, 'I shouldn't object to the size of the reward. You may nail the man before he can make up his mind.'

Prickett sat smiling, as if the prospect pleased him. Then he sighed, half in resignation to the chances of a blighted hope, and half in digestive comfort.

‘We had better get back, Wyncott,’ said Arnold. ‘The ladies are sure to be a little timorous to-night.’

‘I’ll walk with you, gentlemen,’ said Prickett, ‘if you’ll allow me. Miss Pharr will have some papers for me, and I want to catch the last train with ’em.’

‘Are you going up to town to-night?’ Wyncott asked him.

‘Why, no, sir,’ Prickett answered. ‘It’s a wonderful fine night. There’s a full moon due in about half an hour, and it’ll be almost like daylight. I shall have a walk round and take a look at the lie of the country. Don’t neither of you gentlemen take a pot shot at me from the winders.’

Miss Pharr had the desired description of her jewels ready when they reached the house neatly copied four times over, and Prickett having received the manuscript made his adieu for the night and retired. Wyncott had to submit to a repetition of the narrative he had already heard, and unfolded his scheme for a reward. Everybody agreed with him, and Arnold was for going up to town at once with an advertisement for all the London dailies; but, said Wyncott:—

‘Give Prickett a day or two’s law. Let us see if he can do anything. It would seem to

show a distrust in the police to offer an independent reward so soon. Let us wait a little. I have great faith in Prickett. They could hardly have sent us a more competent man.'

Mr. Prickett meanwhile had despatched his documents, and had strolled back towards the house on the hill in the placid enjoyment of a rank cigar. The night fulfilled his prophecy of it, and the moon, when it had once risen above the tree-tops, lit up the landscape with an almost tropic brilliance. The detective made a leisurely tour of the grounds, following the lines of the outer wall, and observing the various places of entry. He hung for two or three minutes on a latchet gate, which admitted to the front lawn, and noticed that the path which led to it was completely sheltered by a high line of rhododendrons.

'They was all on that back lawn,' he soliloquised, 'and if there was anybody in it beside the girl they'd have to get into the house this side, probably at this very gate. If she give the signal when the coast was clear, the party could have slipped along under the shelter of them bushes into the house, and back again the same way. Then the likeliest road would be along this wall. Let's have a look at things.'

He strolled along quietly, looking from right

to left with a vigilance so habitual as to have grown almost unconscious.

‘That old Scotch party,’ he mused, ‘*looks* as if he’d got a head on him. I shouldn’t think as he’d be a very easy sort to gammon, especially in his own line. Aphasia? Agraphia? I wish I’d asked him how he spelt ‘em. I could ha’ dropped a line to the Divisional Surgeon. I’ll ask him when I see him.’

He came past the shelter of the wall which surrounded the grounds, and found himself in an open field. From the elevated spot he stood on he could see a black straight gash in the earth a quarter of a mile away.

‘That’s a railway cutting,’ said he. ‘Not an unlikely place for a cove to make for. Not across the open, though. Where’s the most shelter? There’s that hedge.’

The hedge had a deep ditch beside it, and the bright moonlight, pouring full into it, showed that the rank, damp grasses had been trodden down.

‘Joseph,’ said Mr. Prickett, in an inward voice of solemn exultation, ‘you’re on to something! I don’t know;’ he added more soberly, ‘any village kid might ha’ done that. Children’s fond of walking in ditches, and getting into places where they’ve no business. Never mind,

Joseph. 'We'll follow it up and see if it leads to anything.'

It led at length to a beanfield. There was a gap in the hedge, and Mr. Prickett, surveying the crop, could see a fairly distinct, rather zig-zag line across it, which might have been made by the passage of a man.

'I suppose it's trespass,' he said, 'and wilful damage to property. Never mind. Here goes.'

He marched briskly across the field, keeping the line in sight, and came across another hedge which shelved diagonally towards the cutting. Here again was a ditch, but the hedge threw it into dense shadow. Mr. Prickett struck a vesta, and, kneeling down upon the grass, discovered new traces of footsteps.

'This is just the rout a man would take,' he whispered softly. Sheltered all the way except across that bit o' beanfield.'

He walked on smartly to the edge of the railway cutting. The side was precipitous, and from top to bottom ran a bricked open drain, leading from the ditch to a trench below. Beside the drain the earth was scored as if by the passage of a heavy sliding body. Doubting much if he would find a continuation of the track, the detective launched himself carefully upon the declivity, but, missing his footing at

the first, shot downward at a greater speed than he had counted on, and landed with a shock at the bottom. For a second or two he was somewhat dazed, but recovering himself almost immediately he sat where he had fallen, and smoked his cigar with as impassive an air as if he had gone there in precisely that fashion for no other purpose.

On a sudden a glint of light struck his eye and vanished. He had just been in the act of moving to take an easier posture. He worked his head hither and thither to catch the gleam again, and an improbable notion that the light might have flashed from one of the lost gems quickened his blood a little. He caught the light again, and then stooped down towards it, and with a long-drawn inward whistle, picked up the object from which the gleam had been reflected. The moonlight, broad and clear as it was, did not satisfy him. He struck half-a-dozen wax vestas in a bunch, and examined his find until the lights burned his thumb and finger.

‘Reuben, old pal,’ he said, very quietly, ‘I think *you*’ll have something to say to this. Let me see. It’s half-past ten o’clock. A smart trap ’ll take me up to town in an hour and a

half. I'll try the "Crown and Cushion," Reuben.'

With that, he remounted the bank, choosing a spot less precipitous than that at which he had descended, and made his way rapidly towards the village. Every now and then he danced in his gait, like a pleased child, and at length his inward eagerness so pricked him that he laid down his head and squared his shoulders, and raced across the fields at a pace of ten miles an hour.

Nearing the inn, he composed himself, and entered in apparent quiet, though his brow was moist and his breath still came quickly. The landlord was standing in the passage, and Prickett accosted him.

'I'm told, governor,' he said, 'you've got a famous little bit of horseflesh in your stable. I want to get up to London straight. I may want to get back to-night, or I may not, but I must be there afore midnight. Do you think the little 'orse can do it?'

'It 'll cost you a sovereign,' said the landlord.

'Good,' said Prickett. 'There you are. Short dealings make long friends. Get him in as soon as ever you can. I don't want to lose a minute.'

The landlord took the sovereign and bustled into the back yard. In three minutes a light dog cart, with a slashing-looking mare in the shafts, was at the door.

‘Nip in, sir,’ said the driver. ‘Where do you want to get to?’

‘Holborn,’ said Prickett, as he mounted.

‘All right,’ the driver responded. ‘Land you there in an hour and ten minutes.’

Mr. Prickett had bestowed his find in his breast pocket, and had carefully buttoned it up there. In the course of the journey he laid his hand upon it a hundred times to assure himself of its continued presence, and once he took it out to examine it anew in the moonlight. In some mysterious way the news of the robbery had penetrated the village, and Mr. Prickett’s occupation was already known.

‘Found anything, sir?’ asked the driver, looking sideways at him.

‘Yes, young man,’ said Mr. Prickett, drily, returning the object to his pocket. ‘I’ve found as there’s nothing more foolish than to tell your business afore you’re sure of it yourself.’

They sped along the broad white country road in silence after this, until the yellow glare of the sky in front betokened the lamps of London, and when they had actually entered upon

the streets, clocks every here and there boomed the half-hour. The dog-cart rattled on until Holborn was reached, and there at a certain point Prickett laid his hand on the driver's arm.

'Stop at the first court to the right. There's half-a-crown for you. Use it gently, because you'll have to drive home by yourself. I shan't want you again. Good night.'

He dismounted, and, walking up the court, turned into the bar of an old-fashioned public-house which found shelter there, as if it had shrunk away from its newer and more garish neighbours. He signalled the landlord by a glance, and the man came forward.

'Mr. Gale here? Tool maker. *You* know.'

'Yes, sir,' said the landlord. 'He's taking a glass of ale inside. If he'd take it somewhere else it 'd please me just as well, but he's used the 'ouse for twenty years now, and I don't like to say the word.'

'Tell him a party wants to speak to him,' said Prickett.

The landlord, shaking his head and sighing as one who foresaw trouble, obeyed this request, and Mr. Gale presently appeared. He betrayed neither tremor nor astonishment on seeing Prickett, but advanced with an outstretched hand, and asked if his visitor would take a

drink. Mr. Prickett commanded a 'small lemon and a dash,' and stood tranquilly to consume that modest beverage.

'Reuben,' he said, poisoning the glass in his hand and eyeing its contents against the gaslight, as if they were of some rare and precious vintage, 'if you've got a spare five minutes, you might as well give 'em to me. There's a trifle in the way of business I should like to talk about.'

'I'm at your service, Mr. Prickett,' Gale responded civilly, and the detective, looking keenly sideways at him, emptied his glass, set it on the counter, and moved towards the door. 'If you want to be private, you might as well come to my shop as anywhere,' said Gale.

When they came upon the court, the detective took the honest tradesman's arm in the most friendly and familiar fashion, and Gale looked up at him with an undisturbed inquiry, but said nothing. The shop reached, Gale unlocked the door, and entered first. He lit the gas, which sprang up with a shrill, spiteful-sounding song, and then passed behind his counter. Prickett, closing the door, drew his find from his breast pocket, and balanced it lightly in both hands.

'Did you ever see that afore, Reuben?' he asked with a voice of amiable badinage.

Gale, with a mild surprise, held out his

knotted hand for the object, and, having received it, scrutinised it closely.

‘I might ha’ done, Mr. Prickett,’ he responded, ‘and I might not ha’ done.’

There was a shadow of doubt and wonder on his face.

‘Well, now,’ said Prickett, ‘the long and the short of it is this. That’s your workmanship, Reuben.’

‘Maybe it is,’ said Gale. ‘I shouldn’t be disposed at present to take my oath it wasn’t. It looks like part of a special order, I remember. What about it, Mr. Prickett?’

‘That’s one half o’ the tool,’ said Prickett, tapping it gently with the extreme tip of his finger-nail, ‘as did the job at the Wootton Hill House this afternoon.’

He watched his man like a cat, but Gale lifted a face of innocent surprise.

‘I haven’t heard of it,’ he said. ‘It ain’t got into the evening papers.’

‘Oh, of course you haven’t heard of it,’ returned Prickett in friendly banter. ‘That’s why I thought I’d come and tell you all about it. I knew you’d take a sort of interest in it, Reuben.’

‘Why, naturally,’ Gale responded. ‘In the afternoon, did you say? The hour’s unusual, ain’t it, Mr. Prickett? Is it a big affair?’

‘It’s jewels, Reuben,’ responded Mr. Prickett, ‘valued from thirty to forty thousand pounds.’

‘My Jingo!’ cried Gale, unmistakeably interested. ‘That’s a lift. Where was it?’

‘Hill House, Wootton Hill. The residence of Mrs. Wyncott.’

Gale’s glance fell towards the tool which lay upon the counter. He took it in his hands and examined it anew.

‘Wyncott?’ he said, musingly. Prickett thought he detected a little tremor in his wheezy voice. ‘Wyncott? Where have I heard that name afore?’

‘There’s just a chance, you know, Reuben,’ said Prickett, playfully, ‘as a young gentleman as saved you from a ten stretch last week may put you in for one at next assizes.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Gale, drawling on the words. ‘I remember Mr. Wyncott Esden. He’s a relation of the lady’s, maybe?’

‘He’s the lady’s nephew, said Prickett, ‘and I’ve got the advantage of his assistance in the case. He’s retained for the prosecution, he is.’

‘Well, I wish you well, the pair of you,’ returned Gale, laying down the tool with an odd decision of manner. ‘As for that there little bit of ironmongery, I couldn’t say anything, leastways not for certain. I wouldn’t take my oath

it wasn't mine. I shouldn't like, for sure, to say it was.'

'All right,' said Prickett. 'You'll come quiet, won't you?'

'Come,' said Mr. Gale, with cheerful submission. 'I'll come if I've got to come, of course. There's no need for it, you know, Mr. Prickett.'

'That's as maybe,' Prickett answered.

'I can account for every minute of my time to-day,' said Gale. 'I've been down at my place at Lime'us, discharging goods as come by canal from Birmingham. I've been there from nine in the morning until half-past seven at night, in the presence of competent and reliable witnesses, Mr. Prickett. I know no more about this job than the babe unborn. Look here. What time was it?'

'Close on five o'clock, Reuben.'

'Then,' said Gale, 'I'm safe again. Now I don't care where I goes. From a quarter to five to half-past five me and Richards, the Customus man, and Mr. George, the landlord of the "Cup an' Crown," was standing at the bar there, drinking stone ginger-ale, and having a discussion about this here new Irish Act as is to put down patriotism.'

'If that's the case, Reuben,' returned Prickett, picking up the tool and buttoning his coat over

it as a signal of his readiness to be gone, 'you'll be a free nigger at nine o'clock to-morrow morning. In the meantime we'll try and make it easy for you. You ain't a family man, I think? That's right. There'll be nobody to worrit about you. Gentlemen as leads adventurous lives should make it a point to keep single for the sake of the ladies, Lord love 'em. Your little absences would ha' made the average missus jealous.'

Mr. Gale passed a sufficiently agreeable night at the district police-station, where he sat in friendly converse with two or three officers who had nothing to do, and were simply boring themselves to death before his arrival. At about three o'clock he was, at his own request, accommodated with a cell, and there slept the sleep of conscious innocence until nine. At that hour Mr. Prickett awakened him with the information that his *alibi* had been satisfactorily established, and that he was free to go.

'But, look here, Reuben,' said Mr. Prickett, persuasively, 'it's all humbug your pretending not to know that tool. They was talking about a reward last night, and so large a sum as a thousand pound was mentioned. Any information you might bring to me would be paid for very handsome. You think it over, Reuben.'

‘I’ll think it over, Gale answered,’ with his customary quiet. And, to do him justice, he thought of nothing else all day. He thought to such purpose indeed, that in the afternoon he locked his shop and started on a quest of his own.

CHAPTER X.

MR. PRICKETT had arisen at an unusually early hour in order to visit Gale's witnesses at Limehouse, and having taken nothing but a cup of coffee before starting, found himself in admirable trim for breakfast. He had put something of a brotherly warmth into his farewell to his recent guest, and now sauntered homeward in the yet fresh air of the August morning with looks full of benevolent cheerfulness, as if his being able to set Gale at liberty had been a joy to him. Mr. Prickett had his residence for convenience' sake within a stone's throw of Scotland Yard, where he occupied apartments in an unobtrusive and even shady thoroughfare. His way thither led him past the District station, and as he sauntered by its portals, a man in seedy habiliments and a white hat emerged upon the street. This personage and Mr. Prickett exchanged a single glance in passing, and the detective's face clouded.

'Oh, Lord!' he groaned under his breath, 'them highlows!'

He went on his way with a certain air of petulance, and reaching home, attacked his breakfast spitefully, spearing his bacon as though it gave him personal offence, and knocking his egg upon the head as if he had long nursed a private grudge against it. He found no joy in the police reports that morning, and the advertisement columns appealed to him in vain.

Whilst he sat there dissatisfied, the maid of all work appeared and announced that a gentleman had called to see him.

‘Ask him his business,’ said Mr. Prickett with unusual asperity.

The girl retired, and after a pause of a minute or two reappeared with the statement that the gentleman had been sent from the Yard by Inspector Johnstone. On this the detective demanded that his visitor should be shown up. The man came in—a burly, country-looking fellow of about thirty, with an apple-cheeked face, a sheepish eye, a pendulous lower lip, and an upstanding peak of hay-coloured hair. His smile was friendly and embarrassed, and for a time his hat seemed a burden to him. He looked about the carpet for a spot to set it on, and having placed it carefully in the middle of a square in the pattern, seemed relieved at first, but in a

while repented of his choice, and set it in the middle of another square.

Prickett had pushed his chair away from the table, and had arisen. He stood now before the mantel-piece, filling his pipe from a tobacco-jar, and regarded the new-comer with no favour.

‘Well,’ he said coldly, ‘what do you want?’

‘Ah’ve seen Mr. Johnstone,’ said the visitor in a soft north-country accent, which contrasted strongly with Prickett’s metallic town-bred tones, ‘and he sent me here.’

‘Did he?’ asked Prickett, as if he thought the worse of Johnstone. ‘And what may you want, now you are here.’

‘Ah’ve been in the fo’ce for the last five ’ear,’ replied his guest, with a disarming smile. ‘Ah’ve had a bit o’ luck in the way o’ business dahn at Manchester, and ah’ve got a week’s holiday. D’ye think, sir, as ah could do anything in London?’

‘Might take a ticket back again,’ Prickett responded drily.

‘Ah’ll wait a while,’ the visitor answered. ‘Ah got a bit o’ brass out o’ that Fielding case, and ah shall stop my week anny way.’

‘What had you got to do with the Fielding case?’ demanded Prickett.

‘Nothing, but manage it,’ said the other.

The town man stopped with a lighted lucifer halfway to the bowl of his pipe, and looked at him with a new interest.

‘What’s your name, young man?’

‘White’s ma name, Mr. Prickett. James White.’

Mr. Prickett set the match to his pipe, and drew breath thoughtfully, keeping his eyes fixed on his guest.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘maybe it is. You ought to know. But I shouldn’t have thought it.’

At this dubious compliment to his personal aspect James White smiled with a look of pleased humour. The smile was as keen as his general expression was fatuous.

‘I’m like the young woman in the song, Mr. Prickett,’ he returned. The northern accent had almost disappeared, and his grey eyes twinkled. ‘My face is my fortune, sir, she said.’

‘Sit down, White,’ said Prickett, growing suddenly cordial. ‘I’m glad to see you. If my opinion’s any good to you, there hasn’t been a smarter thing done this three ’ear than that affair of Fielding’s.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Prickett. I’d sooner have you say that than anybody.’

‘Well, *that’s* very pretty hearing,’ Prickett answered. ‘If you’ve got a frugal mind, and

don't want to waste your time up here, I can make it worth a ten pound note to you.'

'What's the office?' White inquired.

'You've seen the morning papers? Well, I'm on that Wootton Hill job. I've got a clue already. I've got the tool it was done with, and I know the man as made it. I laid him by the heels last night, but I proved his alibi for him and I had to let him go. But the tool's his make, and he knows who he sold it to. Now if the swag was a common handful he mightn't do more than write and give his pal the tip, but it's thirty thousand pounds, and he'll want halves. I've had a chap put on to shadow him—a chap as I thought was smart—and I'll be hanged if I didn't meet him an hour and a half ago in Holborn paddling down the street in a pair of regulation trotter cases! Everything else as innocent as you please, and the boots to mark him! And he's after one of the oldest hands in London, and the leariest, bar none!'

'Well, that's a greenhorn's trick to be sure,' said White.

'Green?' returned Prickett, disgustedly. 'Water-cresses ain't in it. Now maybe, White, you may think it's Irish promotion to be put on to sneaking after the Fielding record, but I tell you,' he leaned forward to make this more im-

pressive, and tapped his companion's knee with the tip of the pipe he was smoking, 'the man that undertakes to shadow Reuben Gale, and does it—and does it, mind you—does as smart a piece of work as the smartest man might ask to be put on to. I'd take it on myself, but he knows me like his own born brother.'

'What I want is a London chance, Mr. Prickett,' said the visitor.

'Well, you've got it,' Prickett answered, 'but you've got to know your man. To look at him, and talk to him, you'd think him as mild and harmless as a baby. He's as deep as Garrick, and as cruel as the devil. He don't know how to be afraid of anything or anybody. He's very near done murder once, and if he thought it needful he'd put a bullet in you as lieve as look at you.'

'I read the case you was in with him,' said White. 'That was pretty desperate. I suppose there was no doubt he done it?'

'Doubt?' cried Prickett, with a sudden wrathful flash. 'Never mind,' he added. 'There's a fresh hand dealt out, and we'll see who's got the cards. You can settle on to this job at once, White, if you care to take it. You know London? All right. Stroll down Holborn past Chancery Lane, till you come to the Stamford

Castle, licensed house, left-hand side. Gale's place is opposite—sign over the window—tool-maker's shop. You'll find a chap there, reddish moustache, white hat, pretty battered. *You'll* know him by them thundering boots. "Bacon," says you, and if he answers "Beans," you ask him, 'French?' He says "Broad," and he knows he's off and you know you're on. Wait a bit. I've got three full-length portraits of Mr. Reuben—front, back, and profeel. You'll know *him* again, I reckon?'

'Know him? Know him anywhere. Where shall I find you if I pick up anything?'

'Wire to the Yard. And now you'd better get off, for there's no knowing how soon he'll start. The closer you can stick to him the better. I wouldn't have him draw a breath unwatched if I could help it, but don't you try to overdo it. He'll give you clean away, if you offer him a shadow of a chance.'

'I'll do my best, Mr. Prickett,' the recruit answered quietly, and with that he departed.

'That's better,' mused Prickett, when he was left alone again. 'It's a vallyble gift, such a mug as that chap's got. He's almost as big a sell as Reuben himself. Lord! how people do go round letting 'emselfs be took in by faces, to be sure!'

He sat for a while thinking hard, with his forehead drawn into a tense knot between the eyebrows, and then rousing himself, went out to despatch a telegram to Wyncott Esden.

‘Found clue. Following it. Let me know when girl Grainger can be spoken to.—PRICKETT, Scotland Yard.’

This done, he sought the divisional surgeon, who dispersed his doubts about agraphia and aphasia.

‘If Dr. Elphinstone reads the case in that way, Prickett,’ said the surgeon, ‘you may be sure he’s right. He was a famous nerve specialist when he retired from practice.’

For the time being there was nothing more to be done, but Mr. Prickett was accustomed to the conduct of enterprises which demanded patience, and he was a master in the great art of waiting. This time his energies were not long unemployed, for before midday a man came up from the Yard bearing a telegram from Wootton Hill which asked his immediate presence there.

On his arrival he found the full family conclave assembled. Everybody except Wyncott appeared mightily serious, but the barrister wore a look of amusement.

‘This,’ he said to Prickett, handing him a

broken envelope, 'arrived this morning. We want your opinion on it.'

Prickett took the envelope and inspected it gravely. Then he drew from it a soiled and crumpled sheet of paper and silently perused its contents.

'Respected Miss,' the letter ran. 'Greived I am to the coare to aknolige, that my onely son was in this days crime the stones is now in his, position thuogh long a burdin to a fathers hart I had not lookt to find him gloting on illgott ganes. he say respected miss Thuogh of good education he will nott yeild to A father's prairs & ristoar the objectks of his crim without soMe ricomp-hence. he wil take a thousan and cryquits if agreeable respected miss in tomorrow standards Agny collumn say this is square to

A GREIVING FATHER.'

Prickett stood examining this singular document for some time after it was evident that he had read it through.

'Well, Prickett,' said Wyncott, smilingly, 'what do you think about it?'

'I think a good many things about it, sir,' he answered. 'It's *bond fide* up to a certain point. The parties it comes from have got the stones, because this was posted in London last

night, before anybody but us here knew as the robbery had been committed. But outside that the letter's a flam.'

'What do you mean by that, Mr. Prickett?' Janet asked him.

'Why, miss,' he answered, 'if you'll take a careful look at it you'll find the paper's been soiled and crumpled after it was wrote upon. You can't write on paper that's crumpled as much as that without the pen being a bit guided by the creases. These stains ain't natural dirt. They're coffee, they are, and they're put on afterwards. You can see where they've run the ink a little.'

'But what does all that lead to in your mind?' she asked.

'It leads,' he answered, 'to this, miss. The party that wrote this is trying to look ignorant and poor. It's a false hand to a certainty. A party as was really poor wouldn't want to take pains to show it. "Education," "without," "father," and "respected" is all spelt properly. A man wouldn't be likely to spell "recompense" like this person does, and then know how to spell "education." He's watered his ink, you notice. I should say that letter was wrote by a man better up in the world than he pretends, that the bad spelling was done a-purpose, and

that it was wrote in these printing letters with the left hand.'

'That's very shrewd criticism, Prickett,' said Wyncott, 'and I'm very much of your opinion. But it's apart from the main question. These people, providing that either grieving father or erring son is not a fiction—have certainly got the jewels. Now, Miss Pharr is quite willing to pay the sum mentioned here to get them back again.'

'Well,' returned Prickett, speaking with an air of weight and solemnity, 'if Miss Pharr will listen to my opinion she won't do anything of the sort at present.'

'My dear Prickett,' said Wyncott, his sense of social superiority seeming to assert itself for the first time, 'you must not think too much of your own side in this matter. I advised last night'—he turned to Miss Pharr and addressed himself to her—'that a reward should be offered, and in Mr. Prickett's presence I proposed that it should be large enough to induce the thief to return the property. Now, it would be obviously to Mr. Prickett's advantage to keep the inquiry open, but I must ask him to remember that it is obviously to yours to close it.'

'Excuse me, Mr. Esden,' said Prickett; 'but I don't see that. Why do these parties write to

Miss Pharr? Because your guess last night was right. It's been done for the reward. These people's pressed for money. The way the job was done showed they was new to the game. Anything more clumsy and unworkmanlike I never saw. This letter shows that they don't know what to do with the jewels now they've got 'em. A hand as knew his way about could make five thousand certain. Give 'em rope and they'll hang themselves. They'll be trying to get 'em on the market, and we shall have em.'

'But, Mr. Prickett,' cried Janet, appealingly, 'I don't *want* a prosecution if I can avoid it. You must not mind my telling you how I feel. It was all through my wicked vanity and folly that these poor people were tempted. If I can only get the jewels back at the cost of a thousand pounds I shall be too glad. And perhaps if the poor wretches had a sum like that it would place them beyond temptation.'

Mr. Prickett's smile at this was compounded of respectful admiration, pity, and superior knowledge.

'You don't mean to say, miss, that you're took in by this here grieving father business? That's chaff, that is, miss; mere impudence, and pretty cheeky, too.'

‘Oh!’ said Janet, ‘I should be sorry to think so.’

‘Excuse me, miss,’ returned Mr. Prickett, with an air almost fatherly, ‘but I should be very sorry not to think so. I should pretty soon have to look out for another profession if I did.’

‘The Scotland Yard theory o’ human nature in a case like this,’ said Elphinstone, ‘is likely to be as just as your own, Janet, if it isn’t quite as gen’rous.’

‘Well, now, ladies and gentlemen,’ said Prickett, in his most businesslike voice and manner, ‘I wired this morning that I’d got a clue. As a matter of fact, it’s a clue as it would be a crime to waste. I didn’t mean to show it yet, because I wanted to make it as complete as I could.’ He unbuttoned his frock coat slowly as he spoke. ‘But still it’s good enough to go on. There it is. That’s the tool the job was done with.’

He moved towards the table and made as if he would lay the tool upon it, but Wyncott, advancing, took it from his hand. The eyes of the two men met, strangely; Esden’s dilated, Prickett’s half-closed with a swift yet unperturbed inquiry. Then the barrister took the leather-clad bit of steel in a hand so eager that it shook like a vibrating spring.

‘What’s that mean?’ said Prickett’s eyes, but he talked on without interruption. ‘I know the man that made it, and he knows the party he parted with it to.’ Wyncott walked towards the window with the tool in his hand, examining it by the way. Standing at the window he cleared his throat with a dry cough. ‘When I tell Mr. Wyncott Esden that Reuben Gale’s the man as made it he’ll know the kind of party that we’ve got to deal with. He’s a man as would sell his mother for a sovereign if he couldn’t get a guinea for her, but he’d hold out for the guinea. He won’t say anything yet because he’s waiting for a reward to be offered, but he promised me this morning he’d think about it. Now, ladies and gentlemen, you oblige me to open up my mind. If Reuben Gale once gets into the swim with the thieves *he*’ll know what to do with the property. He’ll cry halves, get the stones cut, and get ’em on to the market with next to no trouble. If you commission me to buy him before he can get at the others you may see your own again, but if you give him time to move it’s all over.’

‘How do you know,’ Wyncott demanded, returning from his place by the window, ‘that this is the tool?’

‘It answers to the marks, sir,’ returned Prickett.

‘Have you tried it?’ Wyncott asked.

‘No, sir. I had no need to. We’ll try it if you like.’

The two left the room and went upstairs together. During their absence Elphinstone addressed himself to Janet.

‘Were I in your place, my dear,’ he said, ‘I’d just leave myself in the hands o’ the constituted authority. I’ve formed a high opinion of this detective fellow. He knows his business.’

‘I suppose,’ Janet answered, with a rueful little laugh, ‘that we must cease to believe in the grieving father.’

‘I think,’ said Elphinstone, ‘you’d better leave Mr. Prickett to dry *his* tears. He’ll certainly wipe his eye if he get the chance.’ This tiny jest was a little out of the doctor’s ordinary way. He seemed to feel a lively joy in it—perhaps because of its very rarity—and rubbed his hands, and twinkled with an unusual complacency.

‘Prickett’s right,’ called Wyncott from the hall before he reached the doorway. ‘This is undoubtedly the tool with which the burglary was committed.’ He entered talking, and his

manner was brisk and even a little excited. 'The man who made this tool,' he said, 'is a client of mine, and only the other day I got him out of a very serious position. He was very grateful. I positively had the pleasure of dining with him after his acquittal.'

'Wyncott!' in a tone of extreme astonishment from the old lady.

'Indeed I had! He came and sat down at the same table with me at the Cock tavern. He wanted to give me fifty pounds for my successful defence of him. I think I may have some influence with him, and I am going to propose that Prickett and I should see him together, and see what we can get out of him.'

'There's something in that,' said Prickett, with his head poised thoughtfully on one side. 'There may be somebody behind Reuben Gale to talk to, and if there should be, the parties won't come anigh me. It'd be just as natural to expect the crows to come and talk with the boy as carries the gun.'

'If Miss Pharr,' said Esden, brightly and eagerly, 'would entrust Mr. Prickett and myself to negotiate with this man Gale, we might, perhaps, save the jewels altogether. It would be the depth of weakness to pay the money to the actual criminals.'

‘You have *carte blanche*, Mr. Esden,’ cried Janet. ‘But pray do all you can to avoid a prosecution.’

‘You hear that, Prickett?’ said Wyncott. ‘We’ll get up by the next train together and see what we can do.’

It turned out that there was no train for an hour, and in the interval Wyncott seemed consumed by an eager restlessness. He insisted on carrying Prickett off with him, that he might learn the precise spot at which the tool was found. Returning, with still nearly an hour to spare, he ran upstairs to pack his bag, and came down with it in a great hurry, as if he had not a moment to waste.

‘You’re going to this business like a sleuth-hound, Wyncott,’ said the doctor. ‘*I* saw ye last night, my man.’

‘Saw me?’ asked Wyncott, turning swiftly on him. ‘Saw me where?’

‘Upon ma word, Janet,’ said Elphinstone, humorously, ‘he’s ashamed of his professional instincts. I watched ’m in the moonlight for an hour last night, racing to and fro for all the world like a dog hunting a lost scent.’

‘I beg pardon, sir,’ said Prickett, ‘but how about that young woman?’

‘Nothing to be done with her as yet,’ re-

turned the doctor. 'That's an odd affair altogether. She'll do no earthly thing but weep, and we can't get her to take her meals.'

'She thinks herself suspected,' said the heiress, 'and she is wild at not being able to explain herself.'

'I dare say that's how it is, Miss,' responded Prickett, with an unfathomable face.

CHAPTER XI.

As Wyncott Esden and Mr. Prickett drove out of Chancery Lane into Holborn, the detective suddenly thrust a hand through the trap-door overhead, and arrested the hansom.

‘We’ve passed our man,’ he said, as he alighted and tendered a shilling to the driver. ‘He’s been out of town—got country dust on his boots.’

In effect, Mr. Gale was walking towards them, at a distance of not more than a score yards. His head was sunk in thought, and he carried his thumb at his lips. As he came near they saw that his teeth were working at the nail, and he was evidently in a brown study. Prickett drew back to let him pass, and Gale went by unobserving.

‘Reuben,’ said the detective quietly. He paused and turned at this, with his mild, brown eyes full on Prickett’s face. A second later he caught sight of Wyncott and gave a start, but recovering himself in a second touched his hat.

‘I want another word or two with you,’ said Prickett. ‘Where shall we have it?’

‘I’m close at home, sir, as you know,’ Gale answered civilly, ‘and at your service.’

The three filed into the dingy shop, Esden leading, and Gale stepping politely on one side until his visitors had entered. A boy stood behind the counter, and the honest tradesman casting a glance at him remarked that they could be private in his back room if they would have the goodness to go on. He threw open a door, and again stood by to allow his guests to pass.

‘While these gentlemen is here,’ he said to the boy, ‘I’m not to be disturbed on no account.’

‘Very well, sir,’ said the boy, with an awestruck eye on Prickett, whose earlier acquaintance with his employer had made him memorable.

‘Now, Gale,’ began Esden, when the door was closed, ‘I daresay you can give a guess as to what brings us here.’

‘Well, p’raps I might be able to give a guess, sir,’ Gale responded, with a waiting look.

‘Prickett has told me everything that passed last night and this morning,’ said Wyncott. He

was very persuasively business-like in tone and manner. 'You've had time to think it over. Now, was that tool of your making?'

'Mr. Esden,' said Gale, with his quiet, ox-like eye upturned towards him, 'I look to be dealt fair with, and so far as I can go you can reckon as I'm with you.'

'Come,' said Wyncott, turning with a quick eye on Prickett, 'that will do! Well, Gale?'

'The tool's my make, sir, right enough. It's like this, Mr. Prickett. I've made three tools on that pattern, and disposed of all of 'em. I've been to the parties as had the two first, and they've still got 'em. I haven't had a chance for a talk with the third party, but I've dropped him a 'int, and I think I may be able to get a word with him to-night.'

'Well, Gale,' returned Esden, 'I suppose it's of no use trying to spur you beyond the pace you are resolved to go at.'

'I can't go no faster, sir,' Gale answered, 'but I think I shall get there.'

'Mind you, Reuben,' interposed Mr. Prickett, 'this ain't a Dutch auction.'

'Dutch auction, Mr. Prickett?' Gale asked, with an almost superfluous air of innocence.

'You don't want two strings to your bow,'

said Prickett, interpreting one parable by another.

‘I shall make it my business, Gale,’ said Wyncott, ‘to see that you are dealt with generously in this matter if you are loyal. You owe me something. I think I have a little claim on you already.’

‘Mr. Esden,’ Gale responded, ‘deal square with me, sir, and I’m firm. But I must make a bargain with you gentlemen. I mustn’t be shadowed, Mr. Prickett. I’m game to lend an ‘elping ‘and in this affair, because Mr. Wyncott Esden’s in it; but I ain’t going to plant Scotland Yard on a man as may have something else agen him, and yet be innocent of this.’

‘Well, Prickett,’ said Esden, ‘can you see your way to that?’

‘I’d give something to be inside your head for half a minute, Reuben,’ said Prickett, shaking his own head doubtfully.

‘Well, gentlemen,’ Gale answered, with his amiable wheeze, ‘if I got that promise I should know as I could trust it. Without it I shan’t move a foot.’

‘Very well, then,’ said Prickett, resigning himself to the inevitable with a grave alacrity, ‘you must have it.’

‘Have I got it?’ inquired Gale.

‘You’ve got it till twelve o’clock midday, to-morrow,’ Prickett responded. ‘After that ——’ He rose, nodded, and put his hat on.

‘Nothing more to be said at present, then?’ asked Wyncott, rising. ‘It will be safer for you, Gale, to bring what information you may get to me rather than to Prickett. You won’t want to be seen in communication with the police. I shall be in my chambers from ten to twelve to-night.’

Prickett acquiescing in this arrangement, the barrister and he went away together. Gale, left alone, sat with a look of deep wonderment, and nodded to himself repeatedly.

‘This,’ he said at last, with a long, slow breath, ‘beats all.’

His thoughts so worked upon him that he arose involuntarily, and without knowledge, and went pacing to and fro within the limited confines of his room, with his hands tucked under the skirts of his respectable frock coat, and his face knit in a profound perplexity. Suddenly a swift step sounded in the shop, the door opened, and Wyncott Esden stood before him with a face like chalk. Gale looking silently at him dropped into a chair, waved Esden to another, and went as impassive as Death, straightway. Esden closed the door, and stood with one hand on

the chair Gale had indicated. There was silence for a full minute.

‘Well!’ said Esden, harshly. He spoke as if there were ashes in his throat.

‘Well sir?’ said Gale.

‘Damn it, man, speak out!’ said Esden, passionately. ‘What do you know?’

‘Well, sir,’ Gale answered, not losing his smooth humility for a moment, ‘I think I know enough. I’ve covered a good deal of ground to-day, Mr. Esden.’ His mild, brown eyes looked deference, and his voice was huskily confidential and plaintive. ‘I’ll tell you what I’ve done, sir. First of all I went to your chambers, and found as you was out. Then I went down to Wootton ’Ill, sir, and had five minutes’ conversation along with the station-master. I found out as you come up to town yesterday by the one thirty-five, and went down again by the train as got there at eight three. Then I walked on to Hemsleigh, and learned as a gentleman paid excess fare from Wootton ’Ill by the four twenty-seven. He carried a black bag, and he started off across the fields towards Wootton. Then I walked back as far as Sandy Park, which is the next station to Wootton on the London side, and I found as the same gentleman had took the up-train at five thirty—the trains fitting in

beautiful. Perhaps you may recall, sir, as the three station dodge was a point against me on my trial. You smoothed it over very pretty, that time.'

'Well,' said Esden, his colour coming and going, and his voice sounding strange in his own ears. 'What does all this come to?'

'Why, I think, Mr. Esden, sir, it comes to halves,' Gale answered. 'You see, sir, the jewels is said to be worth from thirty to forty thousand pounds. Of course, it ain't to be supposed, sir, as they're worth that to us. We might realise anything on 'em, from four to six.'

'Perhaps we might,' said Esden. 'We shall not, as it happens.'

'No, sir?' asked Gale, in a respectful wonder. 'Why not, sir?'

'Unlimited loo makes us acquainted with strange bed-fellows, Mr. Gale,' said Esden. 'If anybody had told me thirty hours ago that I should wish to justify to you any business intention I might form, I should have been amused at the prophecy.'

'I follow that, sir,' said Gale, in his respectful way.

'Since we are made partakers in the same iniquity,' Esden continued, with a badinage so bitter that it made him loathsome to himself, 'I

may as well open my mind to you. I will offer you that full and perfect candour which, if our positions were again reversed, you would deny me. I did this job—I believe that is the professional phrase, but you will forgive an amateur for any possible partial lapse into respectable English—I did this job for a special reason of my own. I happened to be particularly hard up for money, and I did it for the reward. If you suppose that your knowledge will drive me one inch beyond my original purpose, you are very much mistaken. At the worst I can send the jewels back again, and make a run for it. My friends will make no scandal, and I shall not be followed.'

'Well, you know, sir,' said Gale, with a gently argumentative reluctance, 'it's simply chucking money away. I know my way about, sir, and I could get them jewels cut, and get 'em on the market as safe and easy as kiss my hand.'

'Your experience and ingenuity will not be called into play this time, Mr. Gale,' responded Esden. The bestial flavours of detection so stirred his gorge, that he was sick at the very soul with pangs which felt almost mortal. He needed his verbose and elaborated sneers for medicine. They yielded another sort of shame and pain, and so half-solaced the first.

'Very good, sir,' Gale answered. 'I should

like to know if any steps has yet been took, sir. Will you take a seat, Mr. Esden? Mr. Prickett was talking about the reward being made pretty large. He mentioned it this morning, sir.'

'This epistle,' said Esden, producing the 'grieving father's' letter, and throwing it on the table, 'reached the owner of the gems this morning.'

Gale stretched out a knotted hand, and took up the letter clumsily. He read it through with painstaking, and looked up with a grin. Esden had never seen him smile before, and the honest tradesman's mirth brought him a new repulsion. Gale had lost some half-dozen of his front teeth, and his half-obliterated eyes, and creased cheeks, and gap-toothed grin, made him quite ghastly. He looked like some horrible old gargoyle, and Esden, staring at him, got his first intuition of the personality which lay below that humble and smooth exterior.

'That's clever, Mr. Esden,' said Gale, 'that's very clever, sir, and I don't know as we could find a better line to go on. Won't you sit down, sir? I shall make a point of coming to see you to-night, sir, notwithstanding this little talk. It'll be safest, don't you see, sir, in case anything might turn up afterwards, to show that I hadn't

been anigh you. In the meantime I shall make a call at a likely house I know, as if I was making inquiries.'

'Do you think,' asked Esden, looking nervously over his shoulder, 'that you're being watched? Do you think Prickett will break his promise?'

'Oh, dear, no, sir,' Gale answered. 'Mr. Prickett's square, sir. He's passed his word, and he'll keep it. Every officer of his experience, sir, has had to make this kind of compromise. But I shall make the two calls all the same, Mr. Esden, and I shall take care to be able to prove hereafter as I made 'em. No unnecessary risk has allays been my motto, sir.'

'Do you know, Mr. Gale,' said Esden, 'that your chance collaboration in this affair will make it very difficult for me to be honest?'

'Will it, sir?' Gale asked, with no betrayal of surprise or humour. 'As how, sir?'

'I shall have to work pretty hard to scrape together your five hundred,' answered Esden. 'You will understand, if you please, that I am not a thief. I am merely a borrower—upon lines which I admit to be eccentric. Every shilling of this money will be repaid.'

'Well, sir,' said Gale, with an air of reflection and allowance, 'I can understand as a gentle-

man may feel that way. I'll make that little call, sir, for the look of the thing, and I'll be with you to-night at ten. I've had a fatiguing day, sir, and I'd rather get it over early. Then you can go on, sir, and take my information to Mr. Prickett. "Gale," you says, "has screwed it all out of the man he sold the tool to. That man," you says, "is the same as the grieving father. Gale," you says, "undertakes to have back the jewels in four-and-twenty hours from now if the advertisement goes into to-morrow morning's paper. As for Gale," you says, "he can be trusted to make his own terms with the grieving father." Beyond that,' he added, rising from his seat, 'I don't fancy there's anything to be said at present, Mr. Esden. The wool seems drawn pretty well down over Joseph Prickett's eyes this time, and I don't say but what the money's pretty easy earned.'

And with that these oddly-assorted confederates separated for the time.

Meanwhile Mr. Prickett, having parted from his amateur associate, strolled to the district station, and there gave instructions for the relief of Gale's watcher. He left word that no new watch should be established until further orders, and that White should follow him at once to his apartments. Then he walked homewards, musing

with some sense of disappointment on the turn affairs had taken.

‘That thousand pounds,’ he thought, ‘would have looked as pretty in my pocket as it will in anybody else’s.’

The money question apart, he was grieved to be taken off the chase. The man-hunting instinct had grown to be very much a passion with him.

‘I could have had that grieving father,’ so he pondered, ‘*and* consoled him, if ten years’ honest labour could ha’ done it. Reuben was certain to go palavering with him. I should have had Reuben, too. It’s decidedly a pity. It’s a nice job spoiled.’

Carrying the weight of his disappointment with him, he walked home so slowly that White entered almost on his heels. The recruit did not seem to think it needful to continue his countrified pretence.

‘Well?’ said Prickett, by way of sole inquiry.

‘Mr. Gale,’ returned White, with his deliberate north-country tones a little quickened, ‘has been showing me a very pretty run o’ country. P’raps I’d better give you the day as it passed, Mr. Prickett.’

Prickett nodding in answer, White produced

a small pocket-book, and turned its pages over with a moistened thumb until he found the place he wanted. His chief leaned against the mantelpiece with his hands in his pockets, and listened with a dry, uninterested air.

‘I went on at seven to eleven,’ said White, consulting his notes from time to time. ‘Three minutes after, Gale comes out and makes for the Temple, number nine, Elm Court. He mounts to the top o’ the staircase, and raps two or three times. Then he comes down and asks an old woman with a mop and a pail o’ water if Mr. Wyncott Esden’s in town. There was the name of Wyncott Esden on the door-post.’

‘Go on,’ said Prickett. He drew a pen-knife from his waistcoat, and began to trim his nails with it, with a variety of head turnings and minute inspections.

‘Next,’ pursued the northerner, purring equably along, ‘he goes to Charing Cross station and takes train for Wootton Hill.’

When Mr. Prickett was interested that look he wore of being unsurprisable always deepened. It deepened now, and he looked up at his companion with a face set like a mask.

‘At Wootton Hill,’ White went on, ‘Gale had five minutes’ talk with station master, and then struck out across the fields. It occurred to

me that it might be worth while to know what he knowed, so I took a turn at station master myself. He was a bit rusty at first, and I had to tell him it was Queen's business. That oiled him, and he told me Gale had been making inquiries about Mr. Wyncott Esden.'

'Oh!' said Prickett. 'What did he want to know about Mr. Wyncott Esden?'

'He wanted to know what train he went up by, and what train down by, yesterday. Station master told him one twenty-five and eight three. Then Gale asked for the next station down the line. He was told it was called Hemsleigh, and had the way pointed out. I nips after him—very pretty walk, shaded mostly—and Gale gets into confab with station master at Hemsleigh.'

'What about this time?' asked Prickett, making a pretence of yawning behind his hand.

'Gale had been asking after a gentleman, clean-shaved, eye-glass, very swell and handsome. Prob'ly wore a white hat, white wescut, and primrose gloves, he said. Station master told him there had been such a gentleman yesterday, by the four twenty-seven. Carried a black bag, and paid excess fare first-class from Wootton Hill. Gave up Wootton Hill ticket. Seemed to have overshot the mark, and started back on it.'

‘Do you know what?’ said Prickett, turning to the mantel-piece to fill his pipe, and casting a backward glance on White meanwhile, ‘you’re a starting me on the queerest—— Never mind. I’ll tell you after. Go on.’

‘Gale found out as the same gentleman was back at Hemsleigh last night, asking if any suspicious character was seen about with a parcel that afternoon.’

‘James White,’ said Prickett, turning round and stuffing the tobacco into the pipe-bowl with a slow and somewhat exaggerated energy, ‘you’re a man as has seen something. So am I. But all we’ve seen between us, if it was rolled into a heap, wouldn’t make a molehill by the side of this. Jim along. What’s the next move?’

‘Gale asked for the next station on the London route, beyond Wootton Hill. Sandy Park. Got sent across the fields. Short cut. About three mile. Same story over again. Same gentleman took the five thirty up train. That seemed to finish Gale’s inquiries. He took the next train for London, and I come with him in another coach.’

‘*That’s* all right,’ said Prickett. ‘You shadowed him home again, of course?’

‘Yes.’

‘You saw me with him after? Anybody call on him between whiles?’

‘No. You caught him on the way, seemingly. He dropped in at a pub in Chancery Lane, and took a glass of beer very slow and thoughtful. Took nearly an hour over it.’

‘Anybody call on him after I came away?’

‘The gentleman you went in with came back again.’

‘No?’ cried Prickett, in a tone of intensest humorous relish. ‘You don’t mean to say as he went back again?’

‘Went back, looking pretty queer and shaky,’ White responded. ‘Stopped about ten minutes, maybe, and then come out again looking as if he’d had the ’orrors.’

‘Do you think Gale spotted you at all?’ Prickett asked.

‘Never set eyes on me but once, so far as I believe. Platform at Sandy Park.’

‘Well,’ said Prickett, with an unusually smiling and amiable air, ‘I promised Gale I wouldn’t have him shadowed. I think I will though, now I come to think about it. And I fancy as I shall reconcile my conscience pretty easy too.’

‘You want me to go on again?’ White asked.

‘Yes,’ his superior answered, ‘you’d best get back again.’

When White had disappeared Prickett fell to marching up and down the room, and paused now and again to rub his hands with thoughtful satisfaction.

‘I couldn’t understand Reuben’s face one bit,’ he murmured. ‘I can make it out better now. He was just full to the bung with admiration of that young amateur’s frozen cheek in running along with me. Why, it’s a real pleasure to have a pair like that to deal with. Lord love you, Mr. Wyncott Esden, we *shall* have them chesnuds out o’ the fire, but we shall have to wait to see whose paws gets burned. It’s a bit of a pity, too, to see a smart young chap like that fooling his chances away. Of course he does it very clever, but what’s the use of playing good whist when all the cards is against you?’

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Wyncott Esden left Gale's shop he walked on blindly for a little while, neither knowing nor caring in what direction he bent his steps. His whole system of things had gone suddenly to pieces, and the crash with which it had come about his ears bewildered him. It is necessary to have some sort of scheme to live in. A world of no principle, if it lasted but an hour, would bring madness to its occupant. Indeed, the total absence of a scheme could hardly mean less than death, for a madman's mental plan is only distorted.

As a matter of fact, Esden was one of those people to whom their own good opinion is second as an actual necessity of comfort to the applause of others. He had given himself ample occasion to think otherwise, and yet at bottom he had always been somehow convinced that he was a man of delicate honour. If he had been wealthy he would have gone to the grave in that belief. And even though his sense of honour had never

been so inelastic as he thought it, he had certainly never stretched it dangerously to his own opinion until yesterday.

He had not been altogether comfortable about J. P.'s affair. He had employed his most charming and friendly eloquence to entrap that feeble creature, but his glib arguments had appeared less convincing to himself than they had appeared to his confiding victim. Even in the moment of his triumph he had not found it in his heart to be proud of his victory. He had felt it to be a little unworthy of him, too easy a game, as if a grown man should have set his wits to the conquest of a child.

Now, beginning bit by bit to reconstruct his shattered habitat, he thought it quite bitter to remember that what was best and kindest in him had lured him to this intolerable abyss of self-contempt. But for his pity for that weak-backed scapegoat he could never have taken the plunge. He had meant, of course, to take it with little harm to himself. Standing on the solid rock of honour he saw the waters of shame before him, and beyond them another shelf of solid honour, a little lower down, perhaps, but lofty enough to afford dryshod going, and useful for all practical purposes. He was but to have taken a dip and out again. He had certainly not counted

on being forcibly made free of the Dismal Swamp by any monster native to it.

There are few things more curious in this strange world than the complete blindness which afflicts the shrewdest men when they survey the manifestations of their own character. If Esden's temptation had crossed him under circumstances which would have prevented it from becoming more than a remote speculation, he would have been honestly indignant at the notion that it could ever have developed into a temptation at all. But when he had entrapped J. P. into signing that bill he had known himself guilty of a meanness. The proceeds of that bill had gone to pay liabilities meanly accumulated, for it is not the act of a man of honour to incur gambling debts beyond his power to meet. These infractions of his ideal had each cost him a twinge of conscience, but they had not seriously shaken his belief in himself as a man of honour. That facile mind of his, and his quick adaptiveness, had reconciled him to himself in almost no time, and even when he had descended to the depth of appropriating Miss Pharr's property, the act was hardly an hour old before he had begun to justify himself.

Five minutes before its accomplishment the deed was not so much as dreamt of. He had

missed Wootton Hill by pure accident, absorbed in painful thought. The Boomer would have been a safe draw if he could have found him, but malicious fate had ordered otherwise, and he saw nothing before him but ruin and exposure. J. P. would talk, the affair would come to the ears of Mrs. Wyncott, Miss Pharr would learn of it, the golden visions of the last few days would crumble. He had taken his way across the fields from Hemsleigh in a state of almost absolute despair.

Whatever Wyncott Esden wanted he wanted very much indeed, and he always wanted it at once. He had been used to consider this characteristic in himself as a sign of mental concentration, an evidence of force. It lent a certain wild impatience to his wishes, and really did justify his opinion of it at times because it spurred him on to their accomplishment. It brought an added misery to him now, and he dashed himself against the bars which he had himself so painstakingly forged and fixed.

When he reached the house, he had seen its inhabitants gathered upon the lawn, and the memory of that accursed tool of Gale's, and the fact that the jewels lay so easily within his reach, had come upon him with a rush which was at once horrible and irresistible. There was some-

thing altogether diabolical, he thought afterwards, in the manner in which the temptation was thrown into his way, and in which all obstacles to the crime seemed removed. He would not rob Miss Pharr. Honestly, from the very bottom of his soul, he recoiled from the mere thought of it. How could a man of his birth and breeding endure to be a thief? But with the jewels in his hands he could extract a loan, which should take the shape of a reward. He would repay it scrupulously, every farthing. The case was desperate—the time was brief. Almost before he knew it, he was slinking guiltily under the shelter of the hedges with the stolen jewels in his dressing-bag. No, no. Not stolen. Borrowed!

He got back to his chambers in London in a mad whirl of shame and guilt, and triumph and fear. The reflection of his own face in the glass there horrified him, and he had to spend an hour in an effort, so intent that at times it grew hysterical, to control his shaken nerves. After all, he found his natural mental processes his own best medicine. There had been no theft, but merely an abstraction. The jewels would go back again when the reward was paid. His very dexterity in rescuing them would count with the heiress as a point in his favour. Then,

whatever sum might be saved after the payment of his most pressing obligations, should be rigorously hoarded. He was rising fast, and after his successes of last term would be able to command in reasonable measure the prices of the brain-market. He resolved to live like an anchorite, and to work as he had never worked before.

Anyway, the thing was done, and of all follies in the world that of crying over spilt milk is the least profitable. He wrestled with his self-contempt as he had done aforetime, and almost persuaded himself that he was blameless. He was even conscious of a vague but irritating impatience with some half-apprehended outside personage who was too stupid to agree with him. Once more to change the simile, he had embarked upon a comfortless voyage, but the sea looked likely to be smooth enough, and anyhow—*vogue la galère !*

The discovery that he had lost one-half the tool shook him a good deal, but he remembered the course he had taken across country to Sandy Park, and determined to hunt for it. Even if he did not find it there was nothing in it to connect him with the crime. Whatever other defects marred his character, he told himself that he suffered from no want of courage. It would be

quite time to be afraid of danger when it loomed in sight. When he wrote the grieving parent's letter, and smeared and crumpled the paper afterwards, he was sensible of a certain grim humour in the situation, and he accepted this as a sense of self-possession and sang-froid. He resolved to get himself entrusted with the negotiation, and the thought that he would not find the other party difficult to deal with, actually made him smile. There was a flavour of bitterness in it all, but the thing, being begun, had to be gone through with, and in a few months he would buy back his own good opinion by repaying the money. The loan was informally negotiated, to be sure, but as for calling it a theft, or being too hard upon himself in his own judgment, that was mere weakness.

Upon these lines he had compounded with his own nature easily enough, but his enforced partnership with Gale was horrible. Gale was a low scoundrel, an habitual criminal, and but that Wyncott had seasoned his loathing of him by a humorous contempt, he would have found his first private interview with the rascal scarcely tolerable. And now that his partnership with Gale made his own plan doubly difficult, there were moments when it seemed less impossible to return the jewels and plead for terms with the

people whose confidence ~~he~~ had outraged than to consummate this hideous marriage of interest. Gale's partnership made the whole thing look like a maniac's nightmare.

But as he walked, his numbed mind began to move again. The ignoble comedy of which he was to have been the sole actor and the only audience had to be played out to the end, with all possible changes of part and cast. But, he began to ask himself, after all, did Gale's knowledge greatly matter? The reward would certainly have to be shared with him, and it would need a proportionately longer time to repay Miss Pharr. He was in the fellow's hands to that extent, but when Gale had once got his share of the reward their connection would be ended, and the mere opinion of such a brute could matter little. This affair once concluded, they would never meet again. He would suffer no intimacy, and endure no further extortion. It was likely enough that Gale might threaten, but he could only hurt Esden by incriminating himself. Things were not so very bad after all.

By the time he had arrived at this characteristic summary of the situation he found himself at the Marble Arch. He called a cab, was driven to his club, and dined there. He was a great favourite there, as elsewhere, and half the

clubmen who still remained in town felicitated him on his conduct of his last case. It had been a good deal of a *cause célèbre*, and one or two of the daily papers had given Esden high credit for his share in it. He had been hailed as a rising luminary, and it had been prophesied of him that he would shine afar. What with the society of his intimates, a bottle of sound claret, and his own practised power of ejecting disagreeable thoughts, he grew quite jolly and voluble, and at last drove off in a feverish heat of factitious high spirits to keep his appointment with Gale. This brief respite brought its inevitable reaction, and he felt wretched enough as he mounted his staircase in Elm Court, and lit the gas in his sitting-room.

He closed the inner door, and then, stepping with exaggerated caution, went into his bedroom and drew down the blinds. Returning, he lit a candle, and shading the light with his hand stole back to the bedroom, glancing involuntarily from left to right as if in dread of some hidden presence. Then, setting the candle on a chest of drawers, he unlocked the great travelling-trunk in which he had deposited the jewels. His heart knocked at his ribs, and his hands shook as they groped their way past many neatly-folded articles of clothing until they reached the bottom of the

trunk. Then he gave a sudden gasping cry, and fell to emptying the chest so wildly that he covered half the floor of the room with its scattered contents. The plain morocco case was gone.

How long he knelt there he could not have told. He seemed blind and dumb and altogether empty, and when he first came back to himself he was sweating and trembling from head to foot, and ragged patches of variously coloured light were floating before his eyes. Slowly as these fiery patches faded one fixed object impressed itself upon his senses. It fascinated him even before he recognised its nature. He took it with a shaking hand. An envelope. There were marks upon it. He read them slowly, and their meaning penetrated slowly to his mind. 'W. Esden, Esquire.' He stared at the words, kneeling still, until quite automatically he broke the seal, and unfolded a piece of paper.

'Respected sir,' he read there. 'The stones are quite safe in my hands. I have a plan to make everything square, and I am not going to have a chance like this wasted.—Your obdt. servant, R. GALE.'

He did not altogether understand, but he knew vaguely that he was horribly entrapped. His first awaking seemed singular, even to him-

self. Holding the note in one hand he took the candlestick in the other, and waded across the garments he had scattered about the room into the adjoining chamber. There, by the aid of the gaslight, he re-read Gale's brief note, with a futile and dreamlike feeling that the clearer light would help him to understand it better.

The first thought that came definitely to his mind was that he had become unescapably a felon. He realised that so clearly that he would have had a poignant pity for any other man so situated. Then on a sudden his mind cleared, and he knew that the wretch he would have pitied was himself. At this he groaned, in a mingled rage and shame, and at that very instant a knock sounded without. He moved swiftly in answer, and threw the door open with so much violence that it half recoiled. Gale wormed himself into the little passage, and backed against the door until the snap of the hasp told him it was secured. Esden stood threateningly over his visitor, the pallor of his face and the savage gleam of his eyes noticeable even in the semi-darkness of the hall.

'I see you got my note, sir,' said Gale, with his husky, apologetic wheeze. His left hand went with a deliberate businesslike gesture to an inner pocket of his respectable frock coat. For

anything his face, voice, or manner indicated he might have been seeking for a pocket-book or a handkerchief, but the deliberate left hand brought out a revolver, and transferred it to the deliberate right. 'I hope, Mr. Esden,' said Gale, 'that there isn't going to be no sort of trouble betwixt you and me, sir.'

He kept his harmless brown eyes on Esden's face, and edged apologetically round him.

'The stones is perfectly safe, sir,' he said, as he backed into the room, 'and honour between thieves has always been my motto, Mr. Esden. You can trust 'em with me as safe as you could the Bank of England.'

If there was any one manner possible which could have seemed more horrible than another to Esden's mind, Gale might have chosen his own of malice aforethought.

The visitor spoke from within the sitting-room, and Esden, with his hands twining in his hair, leaned his forehead against the side of the hall. Then, as if some will independent of his own inspired him, the barrister plucked his wits together and marched into the room.

'My good sir,' he said quietly, though a sick cold tremor at his midriff had an effect upon his voice, and made it shaky and spasmodic, 'my good sir, you have counted without your host.'

‘Perhaps, sir,’ Gale answered mildly. ‘I don’t see it as yet, Mr. Esden, if you’ll excuse me saying so.’

‘Then,’ said Esden, with a throbbing voice, ‘you shall see it! What I did, I did for a purpose, and nothing that you can do—you had best understand me clearly—nothing that you can do shall hurry me beyond it.’

Gale seeming suddenly to remember his hat, removed it from his head and set it on the table.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ he said, indicating it with a little wave of the revolver.

‘I took those jewels,’ said Esden, forcing himself to quiet, ‘because I wanted money, and because I thought that I could take them safely. I knew a reward would be offered, and I knew that the negotiations would be trusted to my hands. I meant to repay the reward, and I mean it still. If it should come to a question of making a clean breast of it and taking my chance at the next assizes, or to entering into a criminal partnership with you, my mind is made up already. If the jewels are not returned to me within an hour I shall take a hansom down to Wootton Hill and tell the story. Before doing that I shall wire to Scotland Yard that the stones are in your possession.’

Whilst Esden spoke Gale had gently sidled into a seat, and the barrister, at the moment at which he announced his desperate intention, had flung himself into another. The honest tradesman, without verbal answer, cocked a mildly inquiring eye at the note which lay almost beneath his hand upon the table. He read it slowly as if unfamiliar with its contents, and then, crumpling it into a ball, set it between his teeth, and began to masticate it, with very much the air of a ruminating ox.

‘It’ll be as well,’ he explained, when he had reduced the paper to a pulp, ‘not to ’ave anything about to tell stories. You see, Mr. Esden,’ he pursued, respectfully chewing the cud and toying abstractedly with his revolver, ‘that wouldn’t be, if you’ll allow me the liberty to say so, anything like what you might call a reasonable game. I shouldn’t like to boast of my advantages with anybody, Mr. Esden, and least of all with a gentleman as I owe so much to the efforts of. But, you see, sir, if I might be allowed to put it plain’—here he swallowed the paper pellet with a gulp—‘I might p’int out, sir, as between a man armed and a man unarmed, argument is not level, so to speak. Besides that, sir, your bird is in the bush and mine is in the ’and. I don’t want to say anything but what is civil

and respectful, but if you was to do what you propose, Mr. Esden, what is there to injure me from going to Mr. Joseph Prickett of Scotland Yard, and saying "Joseph, I'm tired of being suspected and wanted. Mr. Wyncott Esden was the gentleman as I given that tool to. Mr. Wyncott Esden comes to me along o' you this afternoon, and makes a bargain with me under your very nose, and then to-night he brings me the jewels, and asks me to get 'em on the market for him. But *being* sick of being 'unted and suspected, here they are, and I shall look to the lady to do the fair thing by me." Now, Mr. Esden, sir, I put it to you, what is there in the 'ole wide world to prevent me from doing such a thing as that?'

'You may do what you like,' said Esden, desperately. 'If the jewels are not back in an hour from now I shall wire to Prickett and I shall go down to Wootton Hill and tell the story. I give you one minute to make your mind up.'

He rose as he spoke, and advancing to one of the windows laid a hand upon the fastening. Gale following, interposed himself between Esden and the window, shouldering his companion unceremoniously on one side.

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Esden,' he said, in a

tone curiously quick and arbitrary, 'but I wouldn't do that if I was you.'

'I only wanted air, you fool!' Esden answered angrily.

'You'll do without air for a little while, sir,' Gale responded, with a dogged resumption of his former respectful tone. You go and sit down in that there chair again. I'm sure as you and me can get through this here business without quarrelling. 'An 'en is a stupid sort of a fowl, ain't it, Mr. Esden? and even an 'en has the brains not to cackle before she's laid her egg. Bite first and bark when you've done it, that's always been my motto. Suppose I was to give you a minute to make up your mind, sir? Suppose I was to give you five, Mr. Esden? There's neither of us in an 'urry. Suppose you say five? You sit down and think it over, sir.'

'You ate that note,' said Esden, in a miserable, unavailing rage, 'to destroy the only evidence I had against you.'

'Why, yes, sir,' Gale returned, distorting his face to scratch with the more convenience at one of his little bits of side whiskers, 'that *was* what I done it for. We said five minutes, didn't we?'

He pulled out a bulbous watch, and nursed it in the palm of his left hand. In the dead silence which fell upon the chamber the watch seemed

to tick as loudly as an eight-day timepiece. Esden, leaning back in his chair with an expression of sullen resolution, was so empty in heart and mind that he found nothing better to do than to count the tickings. He got consciously to fifty, and there his mind sank into a momentary swoon of oblivion. A minute later he found himself back again. A hundred and ten, a hundred and eleven, a hundred and twelve. The unobtrusive little mental sentinel once set on duty had gone on listening and counting without further order. Esden gave an irritated groan and changed his posture. The sentinel went off duty, and the entrapped man stared his future in the face until Gale's wheezy voice aroused him.

'Good-evening, Mr. Esden. I'll get up to Scotland Yard at once, if that's your meaning. I needn't waste time by going back for the stones, because in the meantime you might be a-moving. While I think of it, though, these two doors as leads into the 'all both locks on the outside. I'll see to them, and take the keys along with me.'

'Tell me what you want,' said Esden. 'There seemed to be no fight left in him, and he saw that he was trapped beyond hope of escape.'

'Why, that's being reasonable, sir,' Gale answered. He had resumed his hat, and had risen from his seat, but at Esden's confession of

yielding he uncovered himself and sat down again, drawing his chair a little nearer to the table with a manner grown confidential. 'Of course, sir,' he said, leaning across the table, and speaking in a husky whisper, 'it was quite reasonable in you to make up your mind to send 'em back again. As for that, a gentleman in your position might as well nobble the Griffin outside as steal them stones. You wouldn't know what to do with it when you'd got it. But with me, you see, Mr. Esden, it's quite different. In my hands they'll be just like so much ready money, and I couldn't find it in my 'art to part with a chance like that you given me.'

'What do you want to do?' groaned Esden.

'Why, sir, if you come to that,' Gale answered, with a respectful severity, 'I want to do the reasonable, common sense thing. How could a man 'ope or expect to prosper as threw away a chance like this? Between them jewels and the reward, I should think as there's six thousand safe to be divided betwixt you and me.'

'The reward!' Esden gasped, half rising from his chair.

'Why, Mr. Esden,' said Gale, speaking on unmoved, 'a thousand pound—and that's the sum as has been talked about—is a considerable 'andful of money. I've been thinking the 'ole

thing over, sir, and without a little sum of ready money to set to work with we should have to chuck away the swag for half its value. I've got it all planned out as clear as daylight, and it's as easy as breaking eggs, and as safe as whipping 'em.'

'I don't know what devilish plot you've hatched,' Esden cried, rising in a new revolt, 'and I refuse to listen to it. Do what you will, go where you will, tell what tale you will, I go back to plain honour and honesty and take my chance. I may sell my soul some day, God knows! but I will not bring it to market to a brute like you. I will not be dragged from crime to crime, and from baseness into baseness. Go! You have my last word. Go, and do your damndest.'

He flung himself back again into his chair, folded his arms, and sat stock still. His brain was giddy with remorse and shame, and rage and terror. But after this passionate declaration he felt, in spite of all, as if he were half a man again.

'Very well,' Gale said calmly. 'It's a bit of a pity, both for you and me, but if it is to be so, why, so be it. But I'll just say one respectful word to you, Mr. Wyncott Esden, afore I go, because you touch me on a tender point, and

I've got my feelings as much as if I was a gentleman. You talk about me dragging you into crime, sir. Now, that's neither fair nor reasonable, and I shall 'ope as you'll withdraw them words. It's just what I might ha' said myself to you. When I was a-standing in that there dock, Mr. Esden, I made a solemn promise to myself as if I got off I'd done my last bit of night work—my last bit of any sort of work barring honest labour. I begun to see as the cross game wasn't good enough. I'm getting old, for one thing, and my nerves ain't what they used to be. There was never no real need to waste lead on that there butler, and five year ago I should never have dreamt of it—no, nor yet two year ago! I'd swore off, that's what I'd done, afore the jury said "Not guilty," and there warn't a day till yesterday as I didn't say "No" to it, though I 'ave 'ad a pretty 'andsome 'eap of chances offered to me. But in this case the thing's done already, and if you won't take the chances, Mr. Esden, you'll have to take the consequences. I'm a poor man, and I ain't going to fly in the face of Providence.'

He had grown mournfully reproachful, and his manner indicated clearly that Esden's conduct was a disappointment to him.

'It's a million to one,' he went on, rising and

moving a step or two towards the door, 'as your friends won't prosecute when they know. I shouldn't altogether like it if I thought they would. I don't think as a smart gentleman like you would ha' been such a fool as to a-done it a-purpose; but your dropping that tool, Mr. Esden, might have made it very awkward for me if I couldn't have accounted for every minute of my time yesterday afternoon. It was a breach of confidence, sir, to use that tool at all. That's what it was. It was a breach of confidence, Mr. Esden. It wasn't at all the kind of thing as might be looked for in a gentleman, and I won't say as I don't nurse a little bit of a grudge again you for it.'

'Oh, stop this filthy prating, man!' cried Esden, writhing in his self-contempt. The phrase Gale had used as to the chances of his friends forgiveness of him had illumined his mind like the sudden lighting of a torch in darkness. He saw in the glare of that new light the vast wave of shame that rose up to engulf him. He was inspired to panic, and was ready to spring to any refuge.

'Sit down again,' he said. 'Tell me your plan.'

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. PRICKETT, who sat in his shirt-sleeves and slippers for coolness' sake, was at breakfast next morning with a letter propped up against the teapot before him. From time to time as he worked his solid and reflective way through a substantial meal, he turned to the letter and read a line or two of it. He would not allow his appetite to be disturbed, but it was plain that the epistle puzzled him a good deal. Even when his meal was over he forgot to light his pipe; when he had filled it, and seating himself in an arm-chair he read the letter through for the fifth or sixth time. It was dated from Wyncott Esden's chambers, and read thus:

'Gale has been here this evening according to promise, but I am sorry to tell you that my interview with him has proved wretchedly disappointing. I am afraid that Miss Pharr will not only be compelled to yield to the grieving father's exactions, but will have to communicate with him through the advertising columns of the

"Standard." Gale is quite powerless to help us. He has been to the man whom he suspected, and has discovered that the tool supplied to him is intact. He can only conclude that a fourth implement has been made from his model, and that he was deceived by its resemblance to his own handiwork. I thought at first that he might be standing out to secure terms for himself. Perhaps it would be as well for you to see him and form your own opinion upon that point, though for my own part I am pretty well convinced that he is as disappointed as I am. He told me that he had hoped to stand well with the police by reason of his behaviour in this affair, and assured me that he had solemnly sworn to himself to go straight before the jury said "Not guilty." That may be as it may, but it is certain that he must lose by professing ignorance, and I see no reason to doubt his *bona fides*. Unless I hear from you to the contrary I shall insert an advertisement in to-morrow's paper. "A grieving Father.—Honour Bright.—Address, W. E., Esq., Oxford and Cambridge Club." That will be enough. If you care to see me I shall be in till noon.'

'Well, really,' said Mr. Prickett, 'I think I should care to see you; and I think I'll have a look at you at once. A pretty cool game you're

playing, Mr. Wyncott Esden, and a pretty dark game it would ha' been, if I hadn't lighted on the half of Reuben's jemmy. But then I did, ye see, and that makes all the difference.'

He took his coat from the back of a chair, and walking slowly to a sideboard, laid his hand upon a clothes-brush.

'I think,' he murmured, smiling slowly and drily to himself, 'I think I see through it. Gale is to be made to look as if he was clean outside it, but he is to get his share of the reward all the same, and Mr. Wyncott Esden, alias the Grieving Father, the other. We'll try and be in at the distribution, Joseph, whichever way it's done. They won't be such fools as to try a cheque, nor yet notes, I should fancy, and if it's gold they've either got to meet or have a go-between. I've got plenty to nail Mr. Esden on already, but I won't spoil sport. He's having a lark with you, Joseph, this smart young criminal barrister is. Now you go in, my boy, and have your lark along with him, and see who comes out uppermost.'

With that he began to brush his coat with great vigour, and having struggled into it, arranged his cuffs, collar, and neck-tie at the mirror, passed a silk handkerchief with much tenderness round his glossy silk hat, and walked

leisurely Strandward, putting on his smart yellow gloves as he went. In due time he reached the Temple, and mounting smilingly the stairs which led to Esden's chambers, knocked at the door and waited, with his face suddenly grown as impassive as a wall. A middle-aged laundress answered to his summons, and Esden, hearing his voice in inquiry, called to him to enter.

Prickett obeyed, and paused with a look of concern as he saw Esden lying on the sofa with his face half swathed in linen wraps.

'Humbug!' he thought within himself. 'Bit shook at the notion of facing me. Wants to have something else to put it on to, in case I notice it.'

None the less he inquired with friendly seeming solicitude the reason of this sign of his host's indisposition.

'Toothache and neuralgia,' said Esden, drawing aside the bandage. 'Look here.' One side of his face was quite dark and swollen. 'If I am sleepless or worried the confounded thing often gets at me in this way, and sometimes makes me a spectacle for days. There's a beastly draught in my bed-room, too, which makes the thing worse than it would have been.'

He had passed a dreadful night, but the physical pain awakened—as it not infrequently is in men of nervous, sensitive organisation—by his mental troubles, had been almost welcome to

him. He hailed it now, at least, for he felt his nerves so shattered that without it he would have been powerless to hold a screen between Prickett's calmly inquiring eye and his own spiritual miseries. Prickett, at the sight of the blackened and swollen jaw and temple resigned his first opinion, and decided that if this were the result of worry the cause must needs have been remarkable.

'If you ain't able to talk about this ~~affair~~ now, you know, Mr. Esden,' said Prickett sympathetically, 'there is no reason in the world why I should wish you. It seems as if we'd come to a standstill for a minute. I've had inquiries made the whole neighbourhood round, and can't get news of any suspicious-looking character being seen about at the time.'

'Oh!' said Esden, sitting up and propping his sore head gingerly on the palm of his hand, 'I'm quite well enough to talk. Anything that interests me drives the pain away. Gale's square, I think. You see,' he added, 'he has as strong an inducement of self-interest to be honest as he has to be dishonest. He could share the reward by telling what he knows just as well as by hiding it. Then I see no reason to doubt him when he says that he is anxious to get into your good books.'

'Well,' Prickett assented, with a look of

having considered the theme all round, 'that sounds reasonable enough. He might be working on the party's fears, but then it's evident that whoever done that job hasn't got many fears to work on. It was done in daylight, and pretty bold and resolute.'

'Certainly the blackguard's plucky,' Esden groaned.

It was of course Mr. Prickett's cue for the present to be to the guilty Esden absolutely what he would have been if Esden had been all he tried to seem. It would have been natural to have directed all reasonable suspicion towards Gale in the latter case, and the detective was by far too cunning to neglect it now.

'I don't say, Mr. Esden,' he remarked, with an argumentative air, 'that Gale isn't playing the straight game this time. As a matter of fact, I think he is, but I wasn't so blooming green neither as to let him do whatever he liked last night without knowing pretty well what he was up to. I promised him I wouldn't have him shadowed, but on my way home it came into my mind that I was doing rather a foolish kind of thing. If you'll believe me, Mr. Esden, it almost turned me sick when I thought about it. There was I, leaving Reuben to work on the man as probably had the stones in his possession,

giving him free leave as like as not to work up a plan for getting 'em on the market, and going halves in what they sold for, instead of merely splitting the reward.'

'By Jove, yes!' cried Esden, 'that was an oversight.'

'I should think it was an oversight,' said the duplicitous Prickett, with face, voice, and manner expressive of his self-contempt for having made it. 'A promise is a thing as I abhor to break, Mr. Esden, but last night I had to do it. I know the man as Reuben went to, and I know that neither him nor yet his set was active the day before yesterday.'

'Lucky,' thought Esden to himself, 'that Gale made that pretended call.' He shook to think on what gossamer threads his own safety seemed to hang. If Gale had come straight to him without making that astute and self-protective pretence, suspicion might have fixed on him a claw not to be loosened. Even whilst the wheel this thought set whirling in his head was still spinning, he had wit enough to know that no man but himself and Gale could tell how much he merited suspicion, but his nerves were all on edge, and his will was unstrung, and the thought was nothing less than fearful to him.

'So I conclude, you see,' pursued Prickett,

‘that Reuben knew no better, and was doing his best for us. But all the same, he’s a little bit more than slippery, Mr. Reuben is; and I don’t want to have him any deeper in the know than I can help.’

‘I suppose,’ said Esden, shaking inwardly a little at his own daring, ‘that you’ll keep an eye upon him?’

‘Lord bless your soul! What for, sir?’ Prickett answered. ‘He’s shot his bolt. There isn’t a suspected man in London, not of Reuben’s standing anyway, as we don’t keep an eye on more or less. I mean to go down and have a talk to him, but I don’t think he’s in it. The grieving father’s the only lay to go on for a compromise. Of course, if we waited we should have a chance of nailing ’em when they began to move, but if the thing is to be kept quiet, sir, I don’t see anything for it but to put in that advertisement. That’ll get it over pretty soon.’

Now Mr. Prickett, in pursuit of that unsleeping practice of mental photography of which he boasted, had allowed his eyes to wander with their accustomed inquiry over every visible inch of the apartment he sat in. His habit served him well in one case, he was sure, and he fancied that it might serve him as well in another if he

could find means to employ a test for it. Point the first was simple, and was open to any casual eye or any searching and suspicious investigation. It was neither more nor less than a flat bruise on the jamb of the door which led to Esden's bedroom. The indentation was quite shallow and flat, and it had flat edges to it, as if made by the pressure of a small crowbar, finely finished. It was in fact identical with the mark upon the wooden cornice of the cupboard in Miss Pharr's bedroom.

'An experiment?' thought Prickett. 'Was he fool enough for that?' His face betrayed nothing, and his eye never once travelled back to the sign he had discovered.

Point number two was a little more complex and inventive. On the table stood a massive electro-plated writing-stand, with a great square glass inkstand in it, filled with dark violet ink. On the mantel-piece, pushed half behind a turned wooden vase of spills, was a common penny bottle marked 'Blue-black Writing Fluid,' and a pen lay beside it.

'If I might take the liberty, sir,' said Mr. Prickett, rising, 'to take one of these 'ere sheets of paper, I'd write out that advertisement and drop it at the office now.'

'Certainly,' said Esden. 'I can think of

nothing better to be done, and if you approve of it, it had best be done at once.'

Prickett, with a half-sheet of paper in his hand, sauntered to the mantel-piece, took up the pen that lay there, dipped it, and formed a single initial 'A' upon the paper. The ink was pale, and had evidently been watered. Prickett, with his immovable quiet face, looked into the mirror which stood before him, and caught Esden's glance reflected there.

'Shall we spell "grieving" as the cove him self does, sir?' he asked. 'He spells it "ei," but I suppose he'll understand it if we put it right for him.'

Esden fell back upon the sofa with a groan. For one minute his nerves had been so strung that their tension was unbearable, but Prickett had evidently noticed nothing, as indeed why should he? and he was at ease again, except for the physical pang his nervous tremor had occasioned.

'Let us preserve our self-respect,' he said, trying to smile. 'Let us spell correctly.'

'All right, sir,' said Prickett, bending anew above the paper. He wrote and read out the words— A Grieving Father.—Honour Bright.—Address, W. E., Esq., Oxford and Cambridge Club,' and having waved the paper to and fro in

the air, he folded it, and bestowed it in one of the pockets of his sprigged white waistcoat. 'I'll leave that as I go down,' he said, 'and I suppose the affair will come to a finish pretty soon. It's a bit of a pity though, sir, ain't it?'

'What is a pity?' Esden asked, in a voice of impatient pain. He was really suffering, and felt a fierce gladness and relief at his own pain. Without it he would have feared at every moment lest he might betray himself.

'Why, from my point of view, sir,' Prickett urged, 'it would certainly have been a good deal prettier to nail the thieves. It would have paid me better, every way. I can't help thinking, sir, as it's weak-minded to act as we're a-doing. It's against the law, as we both know very well, though of course it's as common as daylight. But with a bit of patience, it's a hundred to one we should have had 'em. And now they get off scot-free, with a thousand pound in their pockets. It's a bit hard lines to have seen a chance like this, to have been actually put on the job, and then for it all to come to nothing. But it's the way of the world, sir. Sweets and bitters, and a lot more bitters than sweets.'

'You may be pretty sure you won't be neglected, Prickett,' Wyncott answered. 'I shall

make it my business to point out to Miss Pharr that without your consent she could not have adopted the course you have taken.'

'I am very much obliged to you, I'm sure, Mr. Esden,' Prickett answered, with sardonic imperturbability. 'You'll let me know, sir, when you get an answer from this party'—tapping at his waistcoat-pocket. 'When it comes to actual negotiations and you've got to meet the folks you're dealing with, I may be able to give you a tip or two.'

'Very likely,' Esden answered, with assumed carelessness and inward thanksgiving. 'I'll write to Miss Pharr this afternoon and tell her that the advertisement will appear.'

'When the time comes, sir,' said Prickett, pursuing his confidential and unsuspecting policy the more keenly now that his last rag of doubt had vanished; 'when the time comes you'll find as the parties won't take notes for fear of being traced by 'em afterwards. They'll want gold. Now that makes the negotiation dangerous. You can't trace a sovereign like you can a note. This grieving father dodge might be neither more nor less than a bold stroke to get a thousand pounds as well as the jewels. Don't you go unarmed, Mr. Esden. I've got a beautiful little revolver, a Tranter, no prettier thing going.

I'll bring it down with me, if you will name a moment when I can call. Say to-morrow morning?'

'By all means, Prickett,' Esden answered. 'I am greatly obliged to you for the suggestion. I might never have thought of it myself. Bring it down by all means. I shall be in till mid-day.'

Prickett took his leave, respectfully sympathetic for the neuralgia and toothache, and walked soberly downstairs, and soberly on into Fleet Street. There he made a call at a gun-maker's shop, and was received by the man in charge with a cordiality not unmingled with worship.

'Called about the revolver, Mr. Prickett?' the shopman asked him when their greetings were over. 'You'll find it work as smooth as a watch now, sir.'

'I want a word with you in private,' Prickett answered, and the man, leading him to an inner room, closed the door and motioned him to a seat. 'I want that revolver,' pursued Prickett in an undertone cautiously measured, 'to be loaded with half a dozen cartridges that won't fire. You can either take the powder or the fulminate out of them, but I want 'em to look as good as gold.'

This particular gun-maker may have been used to curious orders. He expressed no surprise at Prickett's command, but undertook it smoothly, and shook hands with his customer as he went away.

Prickett's unmoved exterior may possibly have belied his internal sensations, but whether with ease or difficulty, he kept the look of one who is bound upon the average everyday business of his life. He dropped in gravely at the advertisement office of the 'Standard,' and there copied the inscription he carried in his waistcoat-pocket, paid the sum demanded of him, entered the amount in his pocket-book, and then walked on to Gale's shop in Holborn.

Gale was behind his counter, looking, if anything, a trifle more respectable and mild than usual, faultless in linen, and scrupulously clean shaven.

'Morning, Reuben,' said Prickett, with the manner of one who is chastened by defeat.

'Good-morning, Mr. Prickett,' Gale returned in a voice which was the very sympathetic echo of the other's.

'This is a bit of a disappointment to you, ain't it, Reuben?' he asked.

'Well, I won't say that, sir, not yet,' Gale answered. 'I can see as you've 'eard from Mr.

Esden. I gave him a call last night, and told him what had happened. About them there tools, now. You know, Mr. Prickett, I can't tell one from another. What's to prevent this last chap from havin' borrowed a similar tool of my make from a pal? If so be as it should have happened as he should have heard as I was a-making inquiries——'

'Why, there's something in that, to be sure,' returned Mr. Prickett. It would be hard to say how much he relished every cunning shift and stratagem upon the other side. Perhaps the fountain of humorous perception tasted the sweeter to him because he did not dare to allow the escape of a solitary bubble. 'I like to hear you talking like that, Reuben, because I must admit that that sounds square. I don't say I shouldn't have thought of it myself. I don't even say I didn't. But, all the same, I ain't sorry to hear you own as much. But if you still think you've got a chance of doing anything, I've come to tell you as it's got to be done to-day. I shan't tell you why, because it's no business o' yours to know it, but after to-day this show'll dry up. If you hadn't been so greedy, Reuben, you might ha' done something. You fixed your mind on getting all you could lay your claws on, and so you don't get anything.

‘what’s the tale you pitched to Mr. Wyncott Esden. You want to stand well with the police?’

‘Really, Mr. Prickett,’ Gale responded in a mild astonishment of self-defence, ‘I don’t see how I could ha’ done more than I have done.’

‘Don’t you?’ Prickett answered with simulated disgust. ‘Well, I’ll tell you. You might ha’ took me into confidence. “So and So and So,” you might have said, “is the three chaps I made the tools for. Now, in place of setting them colloquing together, and giving them a chance among ’em to replace that missing joint, we’ll go at ’em altogether simultaneous, so to speak, and the man as can’t produce his is the man to speak to.” The young lady as owns these jewels don’t *want* a prosecution. You and me might very well have been partners in this matter, but you was too greedy, and that’s all about it. You’re like the monkey as got his hand into the jar and tried to fetch out too much at a time. You’ve lost yourself two or three hundred, and you’ve lost me two or three hundred, and that’s all the good your selfishness has done you.’

‘It’s never been my way, Mr. Prickett,’ Gale wheezed at him, ‘to set your people on to anybody. It wasn’t greed, Mr. Prickett, it was

only because I wanted to do as I'd be done by. That's always been my motto.'

'Specially with butlers,' Prickett answered acidly.

'Now, Mr. Prickett,' cried Gale, 'I beg your pardon, sir, but I cannot 'ave that kind of talk. I was found "Not guilty" by a verdict of my countrymen, and that ought to be enough for any man.'

'Perhaps it had, Reuben,' Prickett answered, 'perhaps it hadn't. Perhaps you was lucky; perhaps you got the reward of your merits. But there's no two ways about this; you've bungled the present business through being too graspin'. You've put me out of the way of making a pretty fair handful of money, and you've lost what you might have made yourself.'

Gale protested against this view of things, and urged his cause with an interior satisfaction which rivalled Prickett's own. They were a well-matched couple, and, but for Prickett's actual knowledge, neither could have gained a featherweight's advantage over the other.

'All right, Joseph,' said Gale to himself when his visitor had left him. 'You've got the needle stirring about already. It'll be a little sharper in the course of a day or two.'

For his part Prickett went away with an expression carefully tuned to melancholy. Even in the freedom of the streets he preserved this dejected aspect. It would never have done to run the risk of any chance gossip taking the news to Gale that Joe Prickett had left him radiant.

CHAPTER XIV.

For the two days which followed immediately on the theft of the jewels, life at Wootton Hill House was naturally somewhat distracted and disordered, but on the morning of the third the post brought to Miss Pharr intelligence which she found of so comfortable a nature that, for her at least, the affair of the burglary shrank into its proper episodical proportions, and no longer threatened to absorb the whole of life and thought as it had done.

‘My dear Miss Pharr,’ wrote Esden. ‘The chase upon which Prickett and I started yesterday has resulted in nothing. Prickett is still confident that if the thieves should attempt to dispose of their booty he would be able to trace them, and to recover at least a portion of it, but he admits that the cheapest and swiftest method will be to deal with that rascally correspondent of yours. I am decidedly of the same opinion, and, accepting the *carte blanche* you gave me, I have already sent Prickett with an advertise-

ment intended to catch the eye of the "Grieving Father." You may be almost absolutely sure that in two days from the receipt of this letter the stones will be once more in your possession. It is a misfortune as it stands, but it might have been so much more serious that your friends may really congratulate you. The thieves will not, of course, enter into communication with the police, and you will see by the advertisement at or near the top of the "Standard's" second column that the "Grieving Father" is invited to correspond with me.'

This letter, read aloud at the breakfast table, sent everybody to the agony column, and the ladies looked at the innocent seeming announcement with romantic thrills, thinking how much it covered. There was an advertisement just above it which stated that Jack was dying for news of his own Heart's Queen, and that the old address would find him. There was another below it requesting the golden-haired lady who alighted at Shepherd's Bush at five twenty to communicate at 231 Vigo Street with the gentleman who carried an umbrella with an agate knob.

'Even these,' cried Janet, her grey eyes widening as if to take in the whole scope of the world's possible villainies, 'may be covert assignments from burglars to their comrades.'

The ladies tressilated deliciously. The crime began to take an air of romance. The gardener slept in the basement of the house for its extra safety, and the local officer was pampered to keep a special eye upon the premises. With these precautions the feminine inmates of the house felt no more sense of danger than was just agreeable. They had fallen into a habit of peering singly into cupboards and under beds in the daytime, and they made the like perquisitions in a bevy at night before retiring to rest. Miss Pharr was the only one who suffered, and she bore her loss so bravely that the others had no heart to reproach her. For her own part she was so glad at the prospect of escaping so lightly, that to lose a thousand pounds in such a fashion as was proposed looked to her like the making of a most glorious bargain.

Wyncott's letter was not the only one which arrived for Janet that morning. There lay for a while untouched beside her plate a missive addressed to her in the easily-recognised characters of the 'Grieving Father.' She eyed it with distaste, and perhaps might not have opened it at all, but for a dreadful suggestion from Edith.

'The wretch may have changed his mind, my dear,' she said. 'He may write to say that the jewels are disposed of already.'

At this Janet laid reluctant fingers upon the envelope, and hastily tore it open. The writer intimated that he had looked in vain in that day's paper for an answer to his former letter. 'Please look sharpp,' he added. 'My son will not wate longer than Fryday morning.'

'He has seen the advertisement before now,' said Arnold. 'He would probably be up at four or five o'clock in the morning to get a copy of the paper at the office. Wyncott may have a letter from him in an hour or two at the club, and will wire us the news directly.'

'Well, Janet, lass,' said the old Doctor, 'a thousand pounds is a thousand pounds; but you're not ruined by it, and ye're lightlier through the bes'ness than we might have hoped to see ye. Wyncott's right when he says that after all your friends may well congratulate ye.'

'I don't deserve to be congratulated at all,' Janet declared, stoutly adhering to her original view of the question. 'I am quite rightly served for my own silliness and vanity, and I am sure that I beg everybody's pardon with all my heart for the trouble I have given them.'

'In that case,' said the Doctor, 'I'll just get back to my interrupted operations, and indeed I'm bold to make confession that I've not been actually idle all the time. I'm getting auld,

Janet, and I've not much time to waste, either for science or pleasure. I've been working in my own room, printing, and a beautiful light I've had for it. If you're in want of further lessons, Edith,' he continued, twinkling slyly at the old maid, 'I'll be ready for ye in my studio in half an hour.'

Edith responded to this invitation by a half-repressed smile, which looked as if it might have had a meaning in it. The Doctor withdrew to his own quarters, his sagacious grey brows twitching, and his kindly grey eyes twinkling with some hidden sense of humour. Beside his bed-chamber the old gentleman had had rigged up for himself a room in which he could carry on his beloved processes. It was cleared of furniture except for a pair of kitchen tables and a chair or two. One of the tables was covered with shallow enamelled pans full of water, and the other bore a litter of negatives and apparatus. He pottered about here for a full half of his time, as happy in the pursuit of his favourite occupation as a child, and produced results sometimes of wonderful delicacy and beauty.

'I should have thought,' said Janet when he had disappeared, 'that you, Edith, were beyond taking lessons from anybody, even from Dr. Elphinstone.'

‘Perhaps,’ the old maid answered, newly struggling to keep down that obdurate smile which would come to the surface, ‘I may be able to give him lessons, though his vanity would never allow it.’

Before the time appointed had expired she knocked at the door of Elphinstone’s work-room, and, being bidden to enter, obeyed, and closed the door somewhat mysteriously behind her. The old gentleman was in his shirt-sleeves, and had his lean brown arms bared to the elbow. His hands were dripping, and as Edith approached him he took up a towel to dry them.

‘I’ve neither chick nor child, nor kith nor kin, as I was telling ye last night when your mother broke in upon us,’ he began. ‘I’ve meant, ever sence the two lads were’s high as that table, that if the two of them should last out my time, I’d divide my worldly belongings between them. But at my time o’ life, having resisted the wiles o’ your sex for seventy years, I’m not going to fall a vectim now.’

‘Now in what sense, Dr. Elphinstone,’ Edith demanded, ‘are you asked to become a victim?’

‘I’ve been a sturdy contemner and enemy of your wiles and ways my life long,’ returned the Doctor, ‘and it’s like a wumman’s impudence to

think she can turn me from my path by just wheedling her finger at me.'

'But who wants to turn you from your path?' she asked with a humorous desperation.

'Miss Wyncott's self,' the Doctor answered. 'Ye want to make a match-maker o' me in my auld age—I that have fought on the side of single-blessedness, and maybe bled for the cause! I'll not say that I haven't been scratched for it years ago. And now I'm to turn recruiting agent for the other side.'

'Surely,' said Edith, 'you don't advocate the universal extension of our principles?'

'Twould make but little differ if I did,' he answered. 'The wisest advocacy the world ever listened to would have but little effect in that direction. I'll just tell ye what I'll do. I'll go so far and no farther. I'll tell the lad what my intentions are. But mind ye, if Arnold knows it Wyncott knows it. I'll tell the both o' them, and acquet my conscience of the whole match-making concern. When I'm gone they'll have something like three thousand a year to divide between them, and a lad that has a profession between his fingers, and brains in his head, and fifteen hundred pounds a year to his name, can marry any woman and feel indepen-

dent, though she were richer than the Queen o' Sheba. Ef Arnold wants the lass,' he went on, with a humorous snappishness, 'why doesn't he tell her so? And if she wants him, Lord, my dawty, they're a heap shyer than they used to be if she can't find a way o' showing him.'

Edith had approached this question originally with all imaginable cunning and reserve. She had never expected or intended to do more than to drop the merest feminine hint, but the Doctor's shrewd eye had pierced to the heart of her manœuvre, and the old man had spoken straightway with a thoroughly Scottish candour and impatience of subterfuge. So they were now, he and the old maid, in full plot together in Arnold's behalf. The old medico respected the young clergyman's independence, and indeed there was an old-world story, buried and forgotten for almost everybody by this time, that Elphinstone himself had been kept single by much such another scruple. He liked Wyncott well, as most people did, but he respected the parson most highly, and was more willing to lend him a helping hand in his love affairs than he was to assist the other. He thought Wyncott little likely to stand in need of prompting. He was not a young man who would lose anything by the mere failure to ask for it.

‘I’ll find a chance to drop him a word,’ said the Doctor, and having secured so much, Edith retired radiant with hope for her two *protégés*. Elphinstone found no chance until after luncheon, and then, finding Arnold on the lawn, he took his arm, and invited him to a stroll.

‘I’ve got a little something to say to ye, lad,’ he said, ‘and we’ll have it out afoot. We’ll have a walk up to the wood together and talk by the way. It’s a lovely afternoon, and none too hot for exercise.’

Arnold assenting, they set out together, but the intended friendly confidence was not to be broached that afternoon, for no sooner had they come upon the highway than they discerned the figure of Mr. Prickett, who was approaching at a business-like pace. He walked up to within a yard of them, and then pausing, touched his hat with a gloved forefinger.

‘I’m glad to have met you outside, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘I’d rather if possible not see the ladies just yet. I’ve something particularly serious to say, and I should like to say it where we can’t be observed or overheard.’

They were both a little surprised by this exordium, and each was conscious of a chill something which was almost fear, though, after

their different fashions, they were as courageous as most men.

‘We’ll be private enough,’ said the Doctor, ‘if we cross yon stile and get into the fields.’

They moved in silence until they had reached the middle of a thirty-acre fallow. They stood upon a little eminence there, and there was not a soul in sight.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Prickett, looking from one to the other, ‘the object I’m supposed to come down here for is to get a cheque from Miss Pharr to pay the sum demanded by the party that stole the jewels. Now that might look as if this affair was coming to an end. As a matter of fact, it’s only just beginning. I must tell you gentlemen beforehand, that what I’m going to say is going to be a heavy blow to you. I think you can both stand it, but it’ll take pluck, mind you, gentlemen, and it’s got to have it.’

There was something so fateful, assured, and solemn in the man’s manner, that his hearers were afraid beforehand, though neither had a guess of what he feared.

‘There’s no good to be got by beating about the bush, sir,’ Prickett continued, addressing himself to Arnold. The Doctor noticed a sort of respectful pity in his voice and manner, and wondered at it. ‘The plain truth of the matter

is, gentlemen both,' said Prickett, lingering with a visible reluctance before he took the plunge, and flashing a glittering eye from one pale and attentive face to the other and back again, 'the plain truth of the matter is, gentlemen, that the person signing himself a "Grieving Father" is Mr. Wyncott Esden.'

Arnold shot out both hands, and gripping Prickett by the lappels of the coat, shook him passionately to and fro without a word. Elphinstone's kindly old face had gone as white as death, but he laid a hand on each of Arnold's wrists and pulled at him persuasively.

'There's no use in that, lad,' he said, with a catch in his voice, 'no use in that.'

'No, sir,' said Prickett, quietly and sadly, 'there's no use in that. No offence on my side, sir,' he added, as Arnold dropped his hands and stood half aghast and half enraged before him. 'I don't wonder as you're hit by it. I was hit myself; but I'm telling you the God's truth, neither more nor less. Mr. Wyncott Esden and the "Grieving Father" are one person.'

'Arnold,' said the old man shakily, 'let me do the talking here. I've h'ard you very highly spoken of, Mr. Prickett, and I presume that you cannot have fallen into so terrible an error except

upon what must look like strong evidence. Let us hear it.'

'Well, gentlemen,' said Prickett, with the same relentless pity, 'if you'll do me the honour to follow me, here's the case. To begin with, it may be known to you or it may not, that Mr. Wyncott Esden is up to his eyes in debt, and a good deal troubled by his creditors. He's got heaps of paper on the market that he can't meet. Next, gentlemen, he was one of the few people as knew about the jewels, value and whereabouts. Next, on the afternoon of the robbery, when Mr. Wyncott Esden pretended to be in town, he was in the neighbourhood at the very minute when the job was done.'

'In this neighbourhood!' cried Arnold. 'What do you mean?'

Prickett, before replying, drew a scrap of paper from his pocket and placed it in Arnold's hands.

'There's a list of the trains Mr. Wyncott Esden travelled by that afternoon, sir. He paid excess fare from Wootton Hill to Hemsleigh when he came down, and he went up with a first-class single from Sandy Park to town again.'

The two gentlemen stared at each other and at Prickett in a horror-stricken amaze.

‘You can prove this?’ said Elphinstone.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Prickett, ‘I can put the station-masters in the box if need be. When I showed Mr. Wyncott Esden the tool the job was done with, he took it well—as well as any man could hope to take it—but it shook him dreadful. When I proposed to visit Reuben Gale, who made the tool, he offered to go with me, as you remember. He made what amounted to a bargain with Gale in my presence; as clever and bold a thing, gentlemen, as I ever knew in my experience. Gale was being watched, and after Mr. Wyncott Esden and me had left him, Mr. Esden went back alone. My man tells me that he came out again ten minutes after, looking as if he’d got the horrors. I was in his chambers yesterday morning, and I wrote that out of a common penny bottle of watered ink as stood upon his mantel-piece.’ He handed his draft of the advertisement to Elphinstone. ‘If you’ll compare that, sir, with the “Grieving Father’s” letter, you’ll find as that’s the ink it’s wrote in. One thing more; the tool the job was done with was tried on the sitting-room door in Mr. Esden’s chambers. I saw the mark yesterday, and it corresponds exactly.’

‘Great Heaven!’ groaned Arnold, suddenly. ‘I remember. There is some horrible conjunc-

tion of circumstances here. Wyncott will explain it all.'

'You remember?' said Elphinstone. 'What do you remember?'

'The broken door in Wyncott's room,' Arnold answered. 'The lock was shattered. He began to tell me, laughingly, of a droll souvenir from a client in connection with it, but he was interrupted twice, and never finished the story.'

'When was that, sir?' asked Prickett.

'It was the day,' said Arnold, turning upon Elphinstone, 'on which he received my aunt's invitation to spend the vacation down here.'

'Then it was the day after the trial of the man Gale,' said Elphinstone. His white face went still paler as he spoke.

'The tool was Gale's make, sir,' said Prickett, 'and it might have got into Mr. Esden's hands quite innocent that way.'

'Wyncott can explain everything,' cried Arnold, with a sick sinking at his heart which belied the courage of his words. 'There is only one thing to be done. It is intolerable that a man of honour should rest for an hour under such a suspicion as this. We will go to town and see him and hear his story.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Prickett, 'but that won't do. There's the question of the

stolen property. One of the things is to get Miss Pharr's jewels back. You must understand, gentlemen, that when Mr. Wyncott Esden went into this thing he went into it alone. He was probably tempted of a sudden, because if he'd meant to do it when he got the tool he'd be altogether too fly and clever to try it on his own door, where anybody might see the traces. It's as plain as paint as it was done for the reward, and it's as like as not, it's liker than not, that he'd have it in his mind to restore the reward, anonymous, when he'd pulled round. That's how I read the case, at least. But now, gentlemen, Reuben Gale is in the business. Reuben Gale has got the young gentleman under his thumb, and when any gentleman has been tempted into crime and finds himself matched with a confederate like Reuben Gale, he gets the seven-leagued boot on. There's no more desperate criminal in London, gentleman, and if you'll wait this out you'll see what it means. I should bet a million to one, if I had got the money, that Reuben means to have the jewels and stick to the reward as well. Mr. Esden isn't such a fool as to have the stolen property about him. If you get at him now you'll close his mouth, and if you'll leave it to me we'll have money and jewels both back again.

‘I won’t believe this hideous story,’ broke in Arnold. ‘I have read of cases which looked as black, or blacker, where the accused man’s innocence shone out at the end as clear as daylight.’

‘That has happened, gentlemen, no doubt,’ said Prickett, ‘and of course it may happen here. I should be very glad to see it happen, but it’ll come out by waiting, and by waiting only for a day or two. In the meantime, gentlemen, suppose it turns out as I believe, I should like to have my instructions straight and clear beforehand. Suppose it becomes my duty to arrest Mr. Wyncott Esden, what am I to do?’

‘Surely,’ gasped Elphinstone, ‘that doesn’t depend on us?’ He seemed to see a gleam of hope.

‘Nobody is compelled,’ Prickett answered, ‘to give a criminal in charge. You can take a man in the act, and let him go, if you’re inclined to be merciful and want to hush the thing up. Anything short of murder can be kept quiet.’

‘Then for Heaven’s sake,’ said Elphinstone, ‘if the thing’s anything more than a nightmare, keep it quiet.’

‘Will you undertake, sir, to get me them instructions from Miss Pharr?’

‘You know, in any case,’ Elphinstone returned, ‘that Miss Pharr is willing rather to pay a thousand pounds than have a prosecution. How much more willing is she likely to be if it turns out that a personal friend—a man she trusted—a gentleman—oh Lord! it’s just too horrible for belief.’

‘For Heaven’s sake, Prickett,’ Arnold besought the man in a passion of entreaty, ‘don’t make it necessary for us to assail Miss Pharr’s ears with this terrible suspicion.’

‘I was Miss Pharr’s guardian,’ said Elphinstone, tremulously, ‘until a year ago. She has been like my own child this eighteen years. I wouldn’t break her heart with such an infamy if I could save her from it by spending every penny I have in the world. Go and give the villain his cheque, and tell him the whole thing’s known, and bid him fly.’

‘That’d be all right, sir, if Gale wern’t in it. But Gale is in it, and we can’t tell where the stones have got to. We shall have to wait and nail them, sir, when we’ve proved complicity beyond a doubt. I think, sir, considering all the circumstances, that I can undertake to keep it quiet if you two gentlemen give me your authority alone.’

‘You speak,’ said Arnold, with a manner

half-wrathful, half-despairing, as he turned on Elphinstone, 'as if this mere chain of suspicion were as fast forged as truth could make it.'

'My dear lad,' said Elphinstone, 'I don't know what to think. God help us all! I'm afraid—sore, sore afraid! Everything seems to point one way. I can't forget how I saw him racing hither and thither in the moonlight. Was he searching for the lost half of that tool?'

'That's how I read it, sir,' said Prickett. 'I wouldn't go back to the house just yet awhile, gentlemen,' he added. 'You'll try to be as natural with the ladies as you can, of course. They won't get nothing out of me, I'm sure. I've got a letter from Mr. Esden asking for the cheque; he gave it me this morning. I'll go up and present it, and get back to town.'

'Is it necessary,' Arnold demanded, 'to go on with that abominable comedy?'

'That's just what it is, ain't it, sir?' Prickett answered sympathetically. 'It's got to be gone on with all the same.'

He took his leave there, and the two gentlemen stayed behind, wondering and horror-stricken. When at length they dared to make up their minds to return they were still shaken, and Elphinstone was in actual need of support for the first hundred yards or so. But he feared

so much lest his broken aspect should excite comment and conjecture that his dread actually seemed to strengthen him, and by the time he had reached the gate he was almost himself again.

‘Come up with me to my room, lad,’ he said, ‘and sit with me awhile. I’ve need of society, and I dare not face the others.’

They ascended the stairs and locked themselves in in the old man’s disordered workroom.

‘I mounted that this morning,’ said the Doctor, touching with a tremulous white finger a photograph which lay beside him. ‘D’ye mind it? It was taken at the very time when that sinful deed was a-doing. We little thought as we stood happy and laughing there that that poor fool, God forgive me, was handing over his soul to auld Horns.’

‘I won’t believe it,’ said Arnold, gloomily, ‘until I know. I won’t permit myself even to doubt Wyncott’s honour. I know him better.’

His brave words were worth nothing to him, and his struggles with his own inward certainty were vain. He took the photograph mechanically in his hands, and stared at it almost without seeing it, and his soul was bitter within him. A great monocle which the old gentleman used for the critical examination of his work lay near at

hand. He took it up in a miserable vacancy, and toyed with it. He looked at the photograph through it, with that interest in trifles which men feel in the supreme blind misery of a great shock. On a sudden he rose with a loud sharp cry, and Elphinstone looking up saw him swaying to and fro as if he were about to fall. The old man sprang to his feet and sustained him, and Arnold guided by the helpful hands sat down again like one dazed.

‘What is it?’ asked the Doctor, anxiously.

Arnold’s eyes had suddenly gone haggard. He turned them with an unforgettable look upon the old man, and answered in a voice of shocking unconcern:

‘It’s all over. His face is there. Behind the rhododendrons.’ Elphinstone’s shaking hands clutched the glass and the photograph, and he half stumbled across the room to the window. For a little while he shook so that the swaying glass and trembling picture showed him nothing. But in a while he braced himself for the search, and found fixed there by a witness no less certain than the sun itself, the face of Wyncott Esden, full of stealth and guilt and fear.

He looked up, meeting Arnold’s glance, and the two stared at each other hopelessly.

CHAPTER XV.

THE relief afforded to the Wootton Hill household by the arrival of Wyncott Esden's letter extended its influences to the maid Grainger. Prickett, turning things over in that shrewd mind of his and reconstructing the living, breathing crime from the few dry bones of evidence in his possession, like a moral Cuvier, still had his suspicion of her as being in some sense the criminal's accomplice. Her fellows of the household looked darkly on her, and even in her first need of service had attended her unwillingly. It was not unnatural that a set of ignorant domestics should look upon her loss of speech as a mere impudent ruse to avoid questioning. To their minds, as in the minds of more instructed people, agitation was a sign of guilt. A skilled practitioner at the keyhole carried the news of the proximate recovery of the jewels into the domestic quarter, and the public mind there grew easier about Grainger, more lenient and less disposed to suspicion.

The girl herself felt this change in the moral atmosphere, but found no relief in that of itself. The lightening of her burthen came with the discovery that her fellow-domestics had ceased to watch her. Being strong and healthy, and of a resolute character, she had sufficiently recovered from the physical shock of her fall to proffer a renewal of her duties within eight-and-forty hours. Her mistress had repulsed her offer with sufficient gentleness. Grainger evidently understood with perfect clearness everything that was spoken in her presence, but her own inability to answer cost her acute anguish, and her unavailing attempts to speak resulted often in bursts of bitter weeping. The very character of her malady might have seemed to explain these rages of grief in a woman of vivacious temperament, but Elphinstone was a good deal puzzled by them, and watched the case with interest.

She sat in the servants' room a few minutes after Prickett's departure from the house. The practitioner of the keyhole, without giving herself the pains of revealing the source of information, told her interested she-comrades how that Mr. Wyncott Esden was in correspondence with the thief, that Prickett had received a cheque for a thousand pounds to hand to him,

and that the stolen property was to be brought back again. Hearing this, Grainger wrung her hands together hard, and rising, walked from the room, red-eyed and pale. She went to her own bedchamber, and kneeling there in an attitude of complete abandonment, with her arms thrown at full length across the chest which held her few belongings, cried without control, her whole figure writhing and shaking with the extremity of her mental pain. This paroxysm over she rose in a wretched quiet, washed her eyes with fair water, and stood looking out upon the peaceful country which lay stretched before her. She rested there for a considerable time, until, stung by a new access of grief, she knitted her fingers together with a groan.

‘Merciful Heaven, what shall I do? What can I do?’

Had she spoken? Had her thought grown articulate again? She stood amazed and almost terror-stricken, and her own voice still seemed to linger in her ear, distinctly syllabled. She seized a summer mantle of black lace and hurriedly adjusted it about her shoulders, tied on her bonnet with fingers so tremulous that she could scarce command them, drew on her gloves, assured herself that her meagre purse was in her pocket, and having done all this with a

feverish, self-hindering haste, stole from the room with a forced air of languor, and went slowly down the stairs. She passed from the house, walked lingeringly along the skirt of the rear lawn, and rounding the line of rhododendrons slipped through that wicket gate over which Prickett had leaned at the beginning of his moonlight search. She was all on fire with impatience, and would in spite of feebleness have run as if for life, but for her terror of being seen and stayed.

The landscape lay at peace, the broad trees sleeping on their own shadow in the hot sunlight, and the road dazzling to her dazzled senses. The world seemed so silent and so wide and solitary that a fear weighed upon her like that of the waste night. She might have been a prisoner for a year, familiar spaces had grown so vast, and she felt so alone and so unaccustomed to be free.

Suddenly a burst of childish chatter greeted her ears, and round the bend in the road came half a dozen village children romping one with another. One sturdy solemn urchin of four or thereabouts walked bareheaded in the rear, intent upon a stick of liquorice, solemn and phlegmatic as an old man. The others danced out of sight, and Grainger, dropping on one

knee, regardless of the dust, reached out her hands to the child with a suppressed but passionate longing in her face.

‘Come to me, darling, won’t you?’

Had she really spoken? She could not tell. The child looked at her with an Oriental gravity and made no answer.

‘Dear little boy, do come to me. Won’t you, dear? Won’t you?’

‘Noa!’ said the child, ‘I ’on’t.’

The girl sprang to her feet and clasped her hands.

‘Thank God!’ she said, ‘thank God!’

The child went on unmoved, as if she were commonplace in his experience. She dared to quicken her pace a little now, and, making for the railway station, saw far off the steam of an approaching train, slow with distance. Looking fearfully round, and seeing nobody who recognised her or was known to her, she went on with a step more and more hurried. The booking-office was open, and she stood before it in such a terror lest her recovered power should again have slipped from her that she was unable to form the words she sought for even in her mind. A rustic hustled her aside, and demanded a third-class return ticket for London. Those were the words she wanted. She feared to lose

them again, and repeated them under her breath whilst the man slowly counted his change. She asked for her ticket, and was understood and served. Then she waited on the platform till the train came up, and entered a third-class compartment in which one cleanly, apple-cheeked old country woman sat alone.

The local train ploughed its slow way townwards, lounging idly through open fields or flower-strewn cuttings, and pausing at every station. Again and again the girl turned to address her fellow-traveller, and froze at the fear that she could but produce an inarticulate sound. At last fear itself spurred her, and she spoke timidly.

‘A beautiful day, ma’am.’

The only response was a stare, and Grainger fell back in her seat with knitted hands and terror-stricken countenance.

‘Eh?’ said the old woman.

‘A beautiful day, ma’am,’ Grainger repeated desperately, uncertain whether she really spoke the words.

‘Speak up,’ the old woman answered, ‘I’m a bit hard of hearing.’

Grainger spoke again in a louder tone, and the old woman sent a momentary chill to her heart by staring harder at her than before.

‘Beautiful day!’ said the old woman; ‘and, lawk a-mussy me! what’s that to make a fuss about?’ she muttered in her own corner after this, and cast suspicious glances at her travelling companion.

‘Please don’t be afraid of me,’ said Grainger, leaning towards her. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘Law bless us! Hear you? Yes.’

‘I had an accident,’ the girl said with outwardly subdued intensity. ‘It took my speech away. I am not certain if it is back again. I have something so important—oh, so important—to say in London, and I am afraid that I may not be able to say it.’

‘Is that it, poor dear creetur?’ said the old woman reassured, and growing motherly and sympathetic on the instant. ‘Don’t you werrit. Your speech is as plain and right as ever it needs to be. You keep quiet and you’ll be all right, my dear.’

The girl leaned back with a sudden gush of silent tears, and thence up to London she and her companion talked at intervals. Arrived at Ludgate Hill she alighted, and made her way hastily to the Temple. She mounted the long flight of stairs which led to Wyncott Esden’s chambers there, and, having knocked at the door, stood panting, with both hands above her heart.

Esden opened the door, and confronted her with a look of wonder. His left eye was still discoloured from his attack of neuralgia and toothache, and what with that and his strange look of sleeplessness, his face bore so unusual an aspect that it frightened her.

‘You here!’ he said gruffly, ‘what brings you here?’

She stood panting for a second or two in silence, and he made a motion as if he would have closed the door, but at that she darted into the passage, and seized his arm with both hands.

‘God has given me back my speech again,’ she said, ‘and I have come to warn you.’

‘To warn me?’ he answered, changing colour ever so little. ‘I suppose I should be grateful for the interest that would seem to express, but, upon my soul, I don’t know what you’ve got to warn *me* about.’

Her wild eyes scared him, and he avoided them. She slipped one hand backwards to the door and flung it to. The other hand still rested on his arm, and shook so that it communicated its own strong tremor to him.

‘Wyncott,’ she said in a dreadful whisper, ‘I saw you leave the room.’

He fell back so swiftly that his head came into sharp contact with the wall.

‘The room! What room? Are you mad?’

‘Miss Pharr’s room,’ she answered. ‘I saw you with the morocco case.’

He tried to answer, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could find neither thoughts nor words. She was clinging to him with both hands again, and her awful avowal once made, she let her face fall forward on her hands and wept. They stood so for a long time—how long neither of them could have told, and at the last he made a motion to leave the little hall. She freed him at once and followed him into the sitting-room. He sank there on to the sofa and sat with averted face, staring blindly out of the window, and, except for the girl’s sobbing, there was silence. The ruin was the ruin of an empire, the stillness the stillness of a desert, and he alone survived some mad catastrophe of fate to listen to that lonely noise of mourning. Well, it was no affair of his. Frankly, he cared nothing.

She stole towards him step by step, and suddenly falling upon her knees, she took the hand which hung nervelessly beside him.

‘Wyncott,’ she said brokenly, ‘a gentleman—a man of honour——’

She could say no more for tears, but the words pierced him to the soul. Their sting

woke him into life and consciousness, and he started wildly up and went pacing to and fro about the room like a madman. She knelt awhile where he had left her, and then rising up suddenly as he had done, confronted him anew, and clung to him with passionate beseechings.

‘You will send them back—the cheque as well! You will be honest—you will be honourable! Oh, my heart, my heart! I loved you so I would have died for you! Nobody knows—nobody shall ever know, but you will send them back! You will be honest! You never meant it, dear; you were tried hard, I know you must have been! The devil tempted you!’

She held to him and fawned upon him, and smiled with a piteous beseeching. Heart-breaking little womanly wiles found their way into face and voice and gesture, and he stood silent before her with bent head, dumb with shame and overwhelmed.

‘I can’t,’ he groaned at last, ‘I can’t.’

‘You can, dear! To be honest!’ She tried with that heart-breaking smile to catch his eye, to lure him to his own soul’s safety.

‘I can’t,’ he said again, ‘I’m tied—bound hand and foot. I’m in the hands of the cursedest villain in the world.’

He broke into execrations so horrible that

for a while he frightened her, cursing Gale from head to foot and from skin to soul. This mad outbreak eased him, and when it had died down to a wrathful silence, he dropped into an arm-chair. She, with recovered courage, was stealing once more towards him when he turned upon her with a forced calm and spoke.

‘Sit down. You know part of it, you shall know the rest.’

He told his story, not extenuating anything, but rather taking a miserable pleasure in his shame, as in old times those would do who were supposed to be possessed. He related drily the story of his defence of Reuben Gale, that scoundrel’s gratitude, the curious souvenir he gave, his own indebtedness, J. P.’s importunities, the advent of the wealthy friend in London, that tragic missing of the friend, his chance passing by of the Wootton Hill station, his alighting at Hemsleigh, his discovery that the house was apparently empty, the sudden temptation that assailed him, his yielding to it, his enforced visit to Gale, his bargain with him, and so on to the second theft of the jewels.

His hearer listened wide-eyed and quite silent save for a sob now and then until he came to this. Then with a little cry of fear and pity she slipped from the seat and knelt beside him,

letting her forehead fall upon his knee and searching for his hand. He gave it her and went on drily, with no sign of being moved at all, except that once or twice there was a harsh sound of ticking in his throat, as if some mechanism were obstructed there.

‘Gale came that night,’ he said, ‘to this room, and told me that he meant to have the jewels and the reward as well, and we are to divide them both between us.’

‘No,’ she said, drawing his hand between her own face and his knee, and resting her hot wet cheek upon it. The voice was tired and fond, and seemed to express a surety that she had saved him, and that the projected crime was done with.

‘I am to meet him,’ he went on, ‘in a ramshackle old house he has the key of, a condemned, deserted place, to-morrow night, pretending that I am going to pay the thief his price and to get back the jewels. I am to give the detective the address in a closed envelope, and if I do not come back in an hour, he is to look for me. He will find me tied and gagged, and the money will be gone. I am to have my clothes torn and the rest of it, and I am to say that I was set upon by three or four villains in the dark, and served in that way. ‘Then, he

concluded, with no change of tone, 'if it's twenty years hence, I suppose I am to ~~murder~~ Reuben Gale.'

'You won't do it, Wyncott,' she said, in the same tired and tender tone, still resting her face upon his hand.

'Yes,' he answered, 'I shall do it, but I shall have the blackguard's life for it.'

'You can't do it with me there, Wyncott,' said the girl, 'and I shan't leave you unless you kill me too. I came to save you, dear, and I shall do it. God gave me back my speech on purpose. I shall have the right to love you in my way, and how could I if you were to do this thing? Think of it, dear. If you break clear of him and tell the truth, you can be happy almost in a day. Why, anybody may be tempted, darling. Bring back your self-respect again. A little shame to pay so great a shame—an hour to pay a lifetime, Wyncott.'

In the renewed eagerness of her prayers she had arisen, and now bent above him with both arms round his neck, vainly striving to look into his face.

'Think of it, Wyncott dear. Even if I didn't know of it. If nobody knew. To be tied for life to such a wretch as that. Always to know that he had beaten you and frightened you.'

At that Wyncott Esden rose, slowly and strongly, and put her hands away from him.

‘Thank you, Polly,’ he said, ‘that will do. I’ll tell the truth and shame the devil, and Reuben Gale shall find that I’m a dangerous catspaw.’

CHAPTER XVI.

IF Esden's crime and his repentance alike seemed sudden to himself, there were in each case influences at work upon which he had not counted. No honest man turns rogue upon a sudden, and no honest man grown rogue returns to honesty by a simple impulse. One might say pretty truly that the two races of honest and dishonest do not mix at all, but there is no need to speak with scientific accuracy. A thousand shifts and dodges, lies, supplenesses, and evasions had prepared him for his fall, and had worked in him without his knowledge. And since the committal of his crime a thousand shocks of shame and pride had acted on his spirit. Perhaps if his master and tempter had even been a gentleman, Esden would have experienced a repulsion less active and profound. As it was, his sense of breeding had been more tender than his conscience. He might gloze the matter over to himself as best he could, and he had really come to the conviction that he was

no more than a borrower. But the loan had been contracted under conditions so eccentric that it needed but little to transform it into theft. Anybody's detection of the act would have done for him as much as this, and Gale's knowledge served as well as another's. In Gale's eyes he was a thief. He had admitted to himself that this insane complexion would be put upon his act by any creature who became aware of it. It was only he who knew the final purity of his own motives. It was only he who could tell on what a basis of honour his abstraction of the jewels was devised. It is curious, and will continue curious to the end of the chapter, to see how a man not absolutely a fool can fool himself; can accept at his own hands a paradox so mad that he would feel his intelligence insulted if another offered it; can lie to the one creature in the world who best knows the truth, and can have the lie believed.

Gale's knowledge made a thief of him not only theoretically or by the force of an ignorant opinion, but to his own apprehension, and however he might have struggled against it, to his own intent. There are many sorts of pride, and Wyncott Esden was not an atom less sensitive about his own good opinion because he had a load of meanly acquired debt, or because he

had entrapped a feeble friend into a dangerous service. His enforced companionship with Gale grated horribly against every fibre of his soul and body. It stabbed his personal sense of dignity to the heart, and slew it outright a thousand times a day. But, as when, according to Milton, the steel passed through the vitals of the celestial warriors it brought only the mortal anguish, and not the mortal release, his self-respect stood there to suffer death, and suffered it, and yet was there to suffer it again, and so on countless times, throughout the loathsome tragedy of the last three days.

At first the thought of another's knowledge had seemed the supreme possible punishment, but his partnership with Gale had taught him otherwise. Of two evils, says philosophy, choose the less. This is a piece of obvious wisdom, but it was perhaps easier to see it and to say it even for the first time than it often is to put it into practice. It is as unnecessary a piece of vocalised wisdom as any in the world, and as unhelpful. A wayfaring man, though a fool, would not err therein if he could help it, but the plaguy part of the business is to discover which of the two evils is the less. To go without a hundred and sixty pounds or to entrap the poor J.P., for instance? To let J.P. suffer, or to turn borrower

on those eccentric lines? To take his share of shame and be quit of Gale by a word of repentance, or to plunge deeper into the morass of crime in the hope of finding a hiding-place? The poor mortal, let him be ever so erring by nature, will choose what seems the lesser evil. Nobody wants to suffer beyond the necessary.

Flogged backward by shame and conscience, and flogged onward by fear and need, Esden had had but a sorrowful time of it. Shame and conscience were already gaining ground when the girl he had once tried to fool came to their aid, and put an end, if not to the fight itself, at least to the uncertainty in which its issues were involved.

But there was more gall for him to drink. He must make his confession either by letter or by word of mouth, and must make it speedily. Then came the question—To whom to make it? To Miss Pharr, directly? Intolerable and impossible. To his aunt? To Edith? Equally or almost equally intolerable. To Elphinstone or Arnold? Could pride, however humiliated, stoop so low? To picture himself as he was, even at his least harmful intent, imaged truly in the mind of any one of them, was in itself a punishment which he felt to be more than equal to his deserts. The horror with which its bare con-

temptation inspired him seemed at times, even when the fight was virtually over, to drive him back to his criminal companionship with Gale.

No philosopher has yet dug down so deep into human nature as to come upon the ultimate springs of will. It happens, far oftener than not, that the final and irrevocable decision is taken without the actual knowledge of the actor; and it is in those moments when will seems dormant that the crucial and pregnant acts of life are performed. When Esden had grown so tired of all this fighting and buffeting to and fro that he felt incapable of action, he did in utter lassitude what he could not do by force of resolution.

Prickett, for his own purposes, had handed to him the cheque which had been entrusted to him by Miss Pharr. Esden had already driven to the bank, and had transmuted the strip of paper into solid gold. If he had never let fall in his flight that fatal bit of evidence which Prickett had found in the railway cutting, all might have gone so well and smoothly with him. The money had actually lain under his hand when Grainger had arrived with the news of her participation in his secret. He took the gold half-mechanically now from the drawer in

which he had placed it, and laid it in its two neat firmly packed canvas bags upon the table. He opened one of them, and counted out a hundred and sixty pounds from it. He had fallen from his own esteem mainly for that, and would have that at any price, whether he could repay it or no. He even felt a glow of spurious heroism in thinking that he would save his feeble friend at his own proper cost. He re-fastened the bag and made up the one hundred and sixty pounds into a compact brown-paper parcel, which he sealed and surrounded with a pencilled note. Then he enfolded the package with a sheet of brief-paper, resealed it and addressed it, and for extra security tied about it a piece of red tape. Then he put the remainder of the gold into a small black handbag, and tossing his hat on negligently, went out and down the stairs. As he walked towards Fleet Street he met a commissionaire, and, entrusting the packet to him, bade him carry it to its address and await an answer. He gave the man a half-crown for his trouble, and told him that the response might be left in the letter-box of his chambers. Then he went gloomily on into the street, hailed a hansom, and demanded to be driven to Prickett's private lodgings.

The detective was at home and alone, in high

good humour, when Esden's name was taken in to him.

‘Show the gentleman up, my dear,’ said Mr. Prickett to his housemaid, smilingly. ‘What’s the new game?’ he asked himself. ‘Ain’t there enough dust in your eyes already, Joseph?’

He laid down his pipe, and advancing to the door of the room stood there in readiness to receive his visitor. The visitor strode past him without uncovering, and dropped upon the table a black bag, which fell as solidly there as if it had contained a pair of dumb-bells.

‘Shut the door,’ he said; ‘I have something to say to you. There are eight hundred and forty pounds in gold in that bag. I hand that over to your care, and’—he clenched his teeth hard for a moment, and rocked to and fro ever so little as he stood with his hand grasping the back of a chair, and facing Prickett without looking at him—‘I give myself in charge.’

At this, for once the unsurprisable stood surprised, and for all his readiness a second or two went by before he could find a word.

‘Well, sir,’ he answered, when he had gathered his wits together, ‘that’s the best way out of it, beyond a doubt.’

He was as cool again as if he had expected this *dénoûment* from the first.

‘Sit down, Mr. Esden,’ he said quietly, placing a chair. Esden obeyed, very much after the fashion of a mechanical figure whose springs are set in motion. ‘I got my orders this afternoon,’ Prickett said, seating himself on the opposite side of the table, ‘and they were to the effect that when things came to a head there was to be no taking in charge at all.’

Wyncott lifted his eyes and stared at him. The upper and under lips were of a leadenish brown. The rims were red with two or three nights of sleepless misery, and the eyes themselves had gone almost colourless.

‘You knew?’ he asked, in a leaden, uninterested way, as if it had mattered less to him than to anybody in the world.

‘Why, yes, Mr. Esden,’ Prickett answered, with a respectful commiseration in his voice. ‘I had the case so far clear that I went down to Wootton Hill to-day to know what I was to do when the pinch came. If you’ll excuse me for saying so, sir, I’m very glad and very much relieved indeed, for your own sake, as you’ve seen fit to take this course. I don’t want to take any liberties, Mr. Esden, because of the position you’ve happened to put yourself into; but I’ve always took a respectful and a friendly interest in you, if you’ll allow the word to pass,

since I first set eyes upon you. Feelings can't be allowed to interfere with business, sir; but I was very sorry to have to track you down, and I'm very glad that the job's took off my hands. You're free to go, sir, and I shall have great pleasure in reporting what has happened. Of course, we shall expect you to serve our turn to the utmost of your ability, and not to spoil our game with Reuben.'

'I am free to go?' asked Esden, in the same weary and uninterested tone.

'Yes, sir,' Prickett answered. 'Such was my instructions.'

'Who gave them?' Wyncott demanded, staring at the table.

'Dr. Elphinstone, sir, and Mr. Arnold Esden.'

Wyncott sat silent for a minute, and removing his hat, passed a handkerchief across his forehead. He played a tattoo on the table with his fingers.

'What made you follow me?' he asked, looking downwards. It seemed, in some dim way, worth while to know. Not that he greatly cared, or seemed ever likely to care again, for anything.

'There was a variety of clues, sir,' Prickett responded, as if he thought the other's curiosity perfectly legitimate and natural. 'There was

the journey down to Hemsleigh, and up from Sandy Park. There was your manner when I showed the tool to you. There was your talk along with Gale when I was by. There was your going back to him when I was gone. There was the ink in your chambers as the letter was wrote with. There was the mark of the same jemmy on one of the doors in your room. There was a variety of things, Mr. Esden.'

'Ah!' said Wyncott, when he had sat in stony silence for a long time after this enumeration; 'I was a fool.'

Prickett shook his head in mournful affirmation of this statement, but made no verbal answer to it.

'You've brought back a part of the money, it seems, Mr. Esden. But the jewels is the main thing. Where are they?'

'Gale stole them from my chambers,' Esden answered, without looking up. Really, now that the thing was done it seemed to matter scarcely at all. The conflict was over, and the shame seemed to have gone with it, and all his cares. There was a very heavy weight upon him, though it seemed as if another carried it and he was sorry for him—the weight of a dull, blind stupor, that was all.

'By George,' said Mr. Prickett, 'that chap's

got his father's own luck. It seems no matter what he does, as if there was never any nailing him. We've got him now on toast, and he gets off it, and walks about scot free with his hands in his pockets, as if nothing had happened.'

'They let him go also?' Esden said. 'To save my reputation, I suppose?'

'I suppose so, sir.'

'Well, they count without me. I shall give Gale in charge myself, so soon as I leave this place.'

'Well, you know, Mr. Esden,' said Prickett, 'I've got my instructions to act on, and I'm going to act on them. They are to keep this dark, and dark it's going to be kept. I don't say as the ladies and gentlemen interested ain't keeping it dark in part for your sake, but they're doing it a good deal for their own.'

'Do you mean to tell me,' asked Esden, lifting his eyes to Prickett's face with a new and deadly light in them, 'that Gale is to go free?'

'What's to be done, sir,' Prickett answered. 'Whichever way it goes you and him has got to travel together. Suppose you was to be allowed to slip and Gale was collared. How much better would that make it for the ladies and gentlemen as is left behind?'

Wyncott was not thinking of the ladies and gentlemen who were left behind. It did not even occur to him to remember that he might have thought somewhat too little of their interest all along. At bottom, whatever courage he continued to summon was hysteric enough, but on the surface he looked doggedly resolved.

‘Whatever happens,’ he said, with a savage concentration, ‘Gale will not go free.’

‘I don’t see,’ Prickett answered, ‘but what he’s got to. You and him is tied too close together, Mr. Esden. I don’t suppose as you are for cutting your own nose off to spite your face, and that is what it would have to come to if you went for Gale. Between you and me,’ Prickett added, ‘you can’t want him much worse than I do. You took him out of my hands only a day or so ago, so to speak, and I’ve been watching him this five years. If he’d have got through all right with this job, and come safe through with it, he’d never ha’ done anything more on this side of the water, whatever he might have done in the United States of America. But now that this job’s dropped through, he’ll be at it again to a certainty. A nibble like this will only make him hungry, and even, ~~them~~ as wishes him the worst can afford to wait for the next move he makes.’

‘What do you mean,’ asked Esden, ‘by what he might do in the United States?’

‘Why,’ Prickett answered, ‘naturally, he’s going there. Or, at least, he means to. He’s got his ticket ready, and he’s got a ticket for a pal, a cutter of precious stones—what do you call him?—a lapidary. He’s off by Saturday’s boat, if he gets the chance. Only you see he won’t, just as it happens to happen.’

‘The infernal villain!’ said Esden, forgetting even his own shame in his wrath at this discovery. ‘He gave me a rendezvous for to-morrow night, when he was to take half the money for the reward.’

‘Ah!’ said Prickett, with a momentary smile, ‘that was the game, was it?’ I thought it might be, and I suppose the understanding was as he was to bring half the profit of the stones when they were cut? Really now, upon my word Mr. Esden——’ Prickett’s pity for his companion’s simplicity was hardly to be expressed in words. ‘Lord, Lord! To think as you should ha’ been took in by that for a moment. Upon my soul and honour now, there really seems to be no end to it.’

He threw himself back in his chair, and seemed to survey human stupidity at large. He

shook his head at it reproachfully, and then nodded at it in resigned despair.

‘I suppose, sir,’ he continued, with a gentle mournfulness, ‘there was some kind of fake got up for a sham struggle?’ Wyncott cast a single glance at him, and said nothing. ‘Ah!’ said Prickett in the same tone, accepting the glance as an affirmative, ‘I thought so. And you was to be found tied up, and all that sort of thing—gagged with your own handkerchief most likely. Dear me! Well, well.’

‘Do you think,’ Esden demanded fiercely, ‘that I am going to let the beast who tried to fool me in that degrading way get off without a scratch?’

‘It’s galling, sir,’ Prickett admitted. ‘No doubt it’s very galling. But I don’t see what you are going to do, all the same.’

‘If they refuse to prosecute him,’ said Esden, darkly, ‘I’ll do for him what he did for the butler. I’ll put a bullet into him.’

‘Not you,’ said Prickett, with a good-tempered allowance, tinged by a little scorn. ‘You think so now, and I won’t say but what it’s natural. But that’s no more your lay, Mr. Esden, than it’s mine.’ He dismissed the theme at once. ‘You might tell me where that rendezvous was to have been held. It’s some

retired and quiet spot, of course, and I want to take him quiet if I can, and have no rum-pus.'

'You may take him how and where you like,' said Esden, bitterly. 'It will make no difference to me.'

He described the place in which the shameful farce Prickett had defined was to have been played. Midway between the western end of Holborn and Piccadilly Circus stood a group of houses already half-demolished to make space for the Shaftesbury Avenue. A friend of Gale's had bought all the locks, keys, and door-handles in the block, and Gale had free access to the deserted buildings, and could employ it without fear of being suspected. Esden indicated the house and the chamber in which the meeting had been arranged to take place, and surrendered the key which was to have secured his own admission.

'Thank you, sir,' said Prickett, pocketing the key. He had hardly suffered himself to depart for a moment from the respectful attitude he would have preserved in Mr. Wyncott Esden's presence, if the interview had happened before a stain had fallen upon the social superior's reputation. 'If you happen to have anything in the way of a private seal about you, sir,' he

said, 'we'll fasten up this little handbag, and I'll take it down to Wootton Hill at once.'

Esden detached a seal from his watch-chain, and threw it on the table, and Prickett, having rung the bell, called for a candle, hunted up a piece of sealing-wax from a drawer of odds and ends, and sealed the bag with great particularity.

'You can't do any harm except to yourself and your friends by meddling,' he said then. 'But I hope you won't try to interfere with Gale. It'll make no difference to my game if you do. He'll never try to leave the country without having the stolen property about him, and I've got him there.' He laid his thumb upon the table, and held it strongly down, with his eye fixed on Esden's. 'I've got him there at any moment. So what I say to you, Mr. Esden, I say for your own good. You've got off lucky, and that's as true as the four gospels. Don't you spoil your fortune, and don't you take this too much to heart. Lord love you, Mr. Esden! you ain't the only gentleman in the world as ever made a fool of himself, nor you won't be the only one as done well after it. Bless your little heart alive, sir, I could tell you things about a lot of people. You take Lord John Russell's tip, Mr. Esden. You rest and be thankful.'

With that Mr. Prickett rose, took his glossy hat from a peg behind the door, and brushed it with scrupulous care. He drew on his gloves with a painstaking exactness and nicety, and, taking up the bag, stood ready to depart.

‘I suppose I have a right to defend myself,’ said Esden, with a hang-dog self-despite. His emotions had begun to wake again, but they were over-tired, and neither his shame nor his scorn were very painful to him. ‘You’d better tell them the whole truth if you tell them at all. Gale gave me that tool as a souvenir, and when the laundress packed my things it got sent down to Wootton Hill by accident. I passed Wootton Hill station by accident last Monday, and never thought of doing what I did until I found the house empty and the chance occurred to me in a second. I’ve taken a hundred and sixty pounds to meet a bill which a poor devil of a friend backed for me three months ago. I meant to take that and no more. As soon as I could have managed it I should have sent back the thousand pounds anonymously. I was willing to pay Gale half the reward to keep him quiet, though I should have had to live like a pauper for a year to pay back his share of it. He wasn’t content with that, but I don’t mean,’ Wyncott added, with a miserable sense of fu-

tility in the words, 'to be forced into crime by him or any blackguard like him.'

'The gentleman who gave you the bill was hard up, I suppose?' said Prickett.

'It would have ruined him,' Esden answered, 'to lose the money. He has a sick wife and six children, and I think he's the feeblest fool under Heaven this minute.'

'Well, sir,' said Prickett, 'I shall lay all that before them, and if I can help it it shan't lose anything in the telling.'

There was little more said between them. They walked to Charing Cross together, and parted at the station gates.

CHAPTER XVII.

By this time the summer dusk was falling, and Prickett, alone in his compartment of the train, abandoned himself to a twilight philosophy in keeping with the influences of the hour. It is perhaps hardly worth while to say that he was not a sentimental man by nature. But in spite of his profession he was a friendly creature, and he had long felt an admiring liking for Wyncott Esden. In the whole world-wide range of intellectual endowment there was no sort of capacity or power so fitted to appeal to Prickett as the kind of cleverness which the young barrister displayed. He had had quite a worshipful recognition for that plausible genius of Esden's, his agile readiness, and soft, persuasive brilliance. In his respectful way—for he was a high Tory in his heart, and thought a prodigious deal of people of good family—he had felt almost fatherly towards Esden for this two or three years past. They had worked, at the beginning of their acquaintance, on the same

side, and had formed as much of a friendship as Inspector Prickett was ever likely to claim with a man so far above him in social status.

It soothed him to remember that if on his former journey that afternoon he had carried a message of pure distress and pain, he was at least bringing something of a sedative for it now. Years of business experience had taught him to be as hard as nails about the woes of common criminals, and had toughened his sympathies for suffering friends. But in this case the trouble sat upon his own doorstep, and his interest in the affair of Wootton Hill was as much personal as professional.

He had grown to be a familiar figure at the little rural station, and his business in Wootton Hill was as well known as if the crier had proclaimed him. The station-master was ingratiating and friendly. Prickett was to the full as amiable as he, but was shrouded in impenetrable mystery. He shook off the inquiring station-master easily, and walked straight on to the house. There Elphinstone and Arnold were in private consultation, and Prickett succeeded in reaching them without the ladies being made aware of his presence. This was all very well for the moment, but it had consequences, for some five or six minutes after his entry Janet

heard of it, and, eager to know if any new complications had arisen, ran upstairs to the Doctor's workroom.

Both Arnold and the Doctor had been terribly put to it to maintain such a demeanour at the dinner-table as should excite no curiosity or comment. They did their loyal best, and failed. Pressed by three excited feminine curiosities at once, the Doctor was forced to admit a new development in the history of the affair. He declined absolutely to say a word beyond this, but was badgered into declaring that the jewels would be returned on payment of the reward. In face of this the ladies could think of no possible reason for gloom, and when left to themselves got into a state of vivid excitement, guessing and wondering left and right. In the midst of all this Janet learned that Prickett had arrived, had sent in his name to 'the gentlemen' specially, and was then closeted with them in Dr. Elphinstone's workroom.

Now when all was said, the jewels belonged to Miss Pharr, and the detective for the time being was in Miss Pharr's employ. Janet conceived that she had a full right to a share in any mystery which might arise. She and she alone paid the piper. Surely she had a right to look

on at the dancing. And when all allowances have been made for exaggeration, women are not much less curious than men.

She had only heard the news of Prickett's arrival a minute ago, when she raced upstairs in some exuberance of spirit, bent on a half-humorous, half-serious assertion of her rights. But when she reached the landing something seemed to lay a warning hand upon her—one of those feelings of premonition which, when realised, dispose even the sanest minds to superstition. What, she thought, if Arnold and Elphinstone were hiding something from her which it would be terrible to know, and would be best left unknown? An odd fear fell upon her, and she hesitated almost at Elphinstone's door. Within the room a voice was murmuring indistinctly, in a level narrative tone, and she guessed it to be Prickett's.

'Confesses?' Arnold's voice broke out. 'Oh, Wyncott! Wyncott!'

At this, without so much as knowing of her own impulse, she dashed at the door, seized the handle, and stood in presence of the three. Prickett, standing behind a bare table in the centre of the room, with the light of a lamp full upon his face, looked up at her gravely, with the expression she had often remarked in him,

at once impassive and alert. Both his hands rested upon a small bag of black leather. Arnold and Elphinstone stood on either side of him, and looked at her as she stood suddenly arrested in the doorway.

‘Darling!’ cried Arnold, advancing swiftly towards her, ‘you must not stay here.’

He had no knowledge of the word he used, nor had she for the time. It came back to both of them afterwards; but for the moment there were other things to think of.

She closed the door behind her and stood with her shoulders leaning against it.

‘I did not mean ——’ she said stammeringly. ‘I did not know ——’

‘Pray, pray leave us,’ said Arnold.

‘There is some reason for this strange agitation,’ she answered, breathing with difficulty. Her limbs were in a violent tremor, and she had found it difficult to stand upright. ‘If I have a right to know it you must tell me. If I have no right to know it, I will go.’

Elphinstone was aghast, and had dropped back into a chair, which fortunately stood behind him. The shock with which he fell into it shook the room. Arnold seemed half beside himself, and Prickett alone retained his self-possession.

‘You will tell me, sir,’ she said, turning upon him. ‘If it is anything relating to the robbery, I have a right to know it, and you need not be afraid to tell me.’

‘Allow me, miss,’ said Prickett, advancing and offering his arm. She accepted it, and he led her to a chair. ‘It was the wish of these gentlemen that you should not be pained.’

‘I have no doubt that they meant kindly,’ she answered, breathing quickly, and looking round upon them with a pale but resolute face. ‘Sit down, Mr. Arnold. Tell us, sir, if you please,’ she turned again to Prickett, ‘what you came to tell.’

Arnold dropped his forehead upon his hands and sat with his face hidden. The Doctor shifted his posture with the air of a man recovered from a sudden fear and grown ready to face it. Prickett returned to his place behind the table, and, laying both his hands anew upon the black bag, leaned forward a little like a lecturer and spoke.

‘With your permission, miss, and yours, gentlemen, this is the history of what has happened.’

He told the story through, with brevity and clearness, dwelling on the sudden nature of the temptation which had assailed the criminal, the

humane nature of the main reason which seemed to have pushed him into crime, his repentance, and the retribution he had made. Wyncott, holding a brief for another in his own place, could hardly have done better, for Prickett had in this case all those sentiments which it was the barrister's art to feign—the personal interest, the candour, the genuine pity, and the faith in the better side of things. Scotland Yard turned counsel for the defence.

‘He’s dreadful broken down,’ said Prickett, ‘and I shouldn’t wonder if he did himself a mischief. The gentleman that backed the bill for him is in very low water. Six children and a sick wife, and business in the City about as bad as it can be. It’s a painful affair all round, but it’s a family party, so to speak, and it can be kep’ quiet. Dr. Elphinstone and Mr. Arnold Esden, Miss, were in favour of keeping it dark, and so I suppose are you?’

Janet was crying by this time, but controlled her tears to listen. She stole now and again a sidelong look at Arnold, and his shamed and broken attitude struck her to the heart. It seemed harder upon him than anybody. She could not think angrily or with scorn of Wyncott. His fall from honesty horrified her, but she felt it, as so many women would have done, in a

reflected rather than a direct and personal way. It could be nothing less than hideous for Arnold, so delicately sensitive to honour, so lofty in all his thoughts and hopes and aims, to find one who had been like a brother to him turned thief.

‘This, miss,’ continued Prickett, lifting his hands from the black bag and allowing them to fall again, ‘was handed to me a couple of hours ago by Mr. Wyncott Esden. Its contents is reckoned to be eight hundred and forty sovereigns. Mr. Esden sealed the bag at my request with his own private seal, as a matter of business, and now—as a matter of business, likewise—I should be obliged if the seal was looked at.’

He offered the bag to Arnold, who glanced at it and nodded; then to Elphinstone, who put up his pince-nez with a trembling hand, and examined the seals with unnecessary closeness to conceal his agitation.

‘That being right,’ said Prickett, ‘I may as well break these seals and hand you, miss, what belongs to you.’

He suited the action to the word, and producing the two canvas bags laid them upon the table.

‘Dr. Elphinstone,’ cried Janet. ‘Arnold! Help me! Tell me what I am to do.’

They arose at this appeal and approached

the table indeterminately. One of Arnold's hands went out towards the gold, but drew back hurriedly, as if he feared to touch it.

'He had better go away,' said Janet. 'We could never bear to look at him again, and he could never bear to see us. Arnold, go to him! Speak to him! Take that horrible money with you, and make him take it and go away, and promise never to be heard of any more.'

'It's the best way out of it,' Elphinstone said. 'Ye're a good creature, Janet, as I always knew. We'll just arrange that between us later on. I'm not long for this world's sorrow, and I'd meant the half of what I have to go to yon misguided idiot. Ye'll have to bear the load of it yourself now, Arnold, such as it is, and we'll spare that much to the puir fool anyway.'

He waved his hand towards the money on the table, and then took to walking the room in a profound dejection.

'You will go?' Janet asked, turning appealingly towards Arnold.

'Yes,' he answered. 'I thank you with all my heart, and I will go. Are you ready, Mr Prickett?'

Prickett, answering by a mere nod, gathered up the money, replaced it in the bag, bade Miss

Pharr a respectful good evening, and followed Arnold from the room. The clergyman took up his hat and gloves in the hall, and led the way in silence down the drive.

‘It’s kindly meant, sir,’ said Prickett, when they had reached the solitude and silence of the road. ‘It’s beautifully meant. But Mr. Wyncott Esden has got his pride on edge, sir, so to speak, and I don’t think he’ll take it.’

‘He will have to take it,’ Arnold answered sternly.

They finished their walk in silence, and, having hung about the station without a word until the train came up, they travelled in silence up to town and drove to Wyncott’s chambers. The self-confessed criminal opened the door at Prickett’s knock, and drooped his head at the sight of his cousin. He blushed scarlet and then went pale again, and entering before his visitors sat down in an arm-chair. At a sign from Arnold, Prickett closed the door.

‘It was our desire,’ said Arnold, ‘to keep the truth you have confessed to from Miss Pharr’s ears, but she has surprised our secret. It will rest with us. She sends you back this money, and bids you go and trouble us no more.’

‘I shan’t trouble you any more,’ Esden

answered. 'But I shan't take the money. I am not such a cur as that.'

'You will take what punishment and humiliation is imposed upon you,' said Arnold, in a cold and dreadful scorn. 'You will take this money and go. Listen, if you please, and understand. We, whom you have shamed beyond any hope of forgetfulness, are not disposed to accept any further shame at your hands. We will not accept the shame of your lingering here. We will not accept the shame of your social failure hereafter, or your poverty in another country. This is not offered in any spirit of revenge. We protect ourselves against you, that is all. You have given us the right to protect ourselves against you, and we will exercise it.'

'You can give me in charge, if you like,' said Wyncott. 'I've made up my mind to do it for myself.'

'You are not satisfied,' Arnold asked, 'with the shame and misery you have brought on us already?'

'Oh,' Wyncott answered, in grim self-hatred, 'I'm satisfied, if you are.' He arose and walked into his bedroom, and Prickett's eye followed him watchfully and warily. There was a moment's silence and then Wyncott's voice

sounded with a loud quaver in the tone—
‘Good-bye!’ Then there was a clicking explosion like the noise made by the firing of a percussion cap, and then another and another.

Prickett dashed into the bedroom, and Arnold followed; for a moment there was a wild struggle in the half-darkness, and then the two tore Wyncott back into the light. He was bleeding from a chance scratch upon the face, and he held a revolver in his hand.

‘That’s your handiwork!’ he cried wildly, turning his desperate face on Prickett.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the detective quietly. ‘That’s my handiwork. I had the powder took out of the cartridges. Now you take it easy. Nobody wants to hurt you.’

Wyncott made one tremendous struggle to free himself, but Prickett tripped him by the heels with lightning swiftness, and but for Arnold’s grip he would have fallen headlong. As it was the fall wrenched his arm badly, and the intense pain quieted him.

‘Now you sit down there, if you please, sir,’ said Prickett, planting him on the sofa. ‘Try to move, and I’ll find a way to stop you. Upon my word, I *am* ashamed! No more pluck than that? I always took you for a thoroughbred. Ain’t you got no respect for your own good

name? Ain't you got *no* pity for your friends? Why, it's simply sickening, this is. It's contemptible. That's what I call it. If this gentleman likes to talk to you he may, but I'm sure I don't want to after such an unmanlike exhibition.'

He gave Arnold a swift persuasive glance and gesture, and passed him with a whisper.

'I'll see to his razors. He's ripe for anything.'

With that he slipped into Wyncott's bedroom, and having lit the gas there, found the razor case and pocketed it. He made a further search, but, finding nothing which could be put to dangerous uses, went back into the sitting-room. Arnold was sitting before his cousin, and had taken his lax right hand in his own. Prickett nodded to himself approvingly.

'He'll do a lot more on that lay than on the other,' he said inwardly. 'Gentlemen, both,' he added aloud, 'I'll just step back into the next room, and have a look at the evening.'

Arnold glanced up at him but Esden gave no sign. The detective winked and nodded encouragement, and then withdrew, closing the door behind him.

'Take this money now, Wyncott,' said Arnold, when they had sat in silence for a

time. 'Accept that humiliation for the sake of those whom you have shamed and injured. Go away and make the best of the talents God has given you. Try to make atonement for the past, and if in time to come you can throw this burden from your shoulders, the payment will be accepted with pride and joy. But take it now and let that be the first sign of a true repentance. You cannot repay us for our pain by sinking—you may by swimming.'

Arnold felt a convulsive grip from the hand he held in his own, and responded to it by a firm strong pressure. There were many things he was disposed to speak of, and to a younger man, or one more ignorant, he would have uttered his mind, in the words his office gave him a right to use. But he was certainly none the worse a man, and possibly none the poorer as a clergyman, because his delicacy kept him silent.

'You will go away?' he asked at length, after long silent thinking. 'And try?' A grip of the hand was the sole answer to either question. 'And do what we desire?' There was a pause after this, and the question had to be repeated, but in the end it met the same answer as the others. 'I have your word of honour for all this?'

‘Yes,’ said Wyncott, in a voice hardly audible. ‘I shan’t see you again. Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye, Wyncott. God help you! God bless you!’

They parted in that fashion, and Arnold entering the bedroom drew Prickett towards him.

‘Stay with him a little.’ The detective nodded. ‘You’re a good fellow, Prickett. Shake hands. Good-night.’

Whether a clergyman ought to think the better of a sinner for attempting suicide may be left for the present as an open question. But it is very certain that Wyncott’s desperate resolution had changed his cousin’s mind towards him. At least it showed the depth of his despair, and despair is so terrible a thing that few men can bear to look at it unmoved.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GALE, meanwhile, regarded himself as one of the happiest men alive. At the thought of what his sentiment of gratitude towards Wyncott Esden had done for him, he was more than half disposed to turn virtuous altogether. It was simply glorious to have made so rich a haul as the result of one good impulse. If he had been a common insensible criminal he would have left his defender unthanked—would have offered him no souvenir, and so would have had no clue to guide him to the future which now lay in his hands. Gratitude was a moral virtue, and gratitude had done this for him. He would cultivate the rest of the moral virtues—when he could afford them.

That time was not yet. It never so much as occurred to him to sell so valuable a merchandise as his silence for less than he could get for it. To commit burglary on a man who could not complain of the offence was a pleasure he had never before tasted, and to be able harm-

lessly to confess the act was something of a pleasing novelty also. But Gale had been respectably brought up, and had beliefs which might have been called religious, if they had ever formed themselves into any sort of law for him. He meant to take those beliefs into serious consideration when he and Miss Pharr's jewels were safe in New York, and he pictured himself in the near future as a highly respectable, well-to-do citizen, who took a considerable interest in chapel discipline, and was very fairly regular in attendance on the means of grace.

The prospect was alluring, and he took pains to reach it. To live in clover, and at the same time to study the economics of eternity and doctor his immortal soul—what could any man ask better?

Amongst his acquaintance—which, like Mr. Weller's knowledge of London, was extensive and peculiar—was a certain bankrupt and hungry rascal who had once been in high repute as a lapidary. He was a skilled workman, and was respected as an expert in gems, but he had broken trust, had passed half a dozen years in jail, and could find no employment. Gale had his thumb upon this fellow, and the man had for so many years been accustomed to fear

him that his services might be retained with a perfect sense of security.

Reuben found this personage in even worse circumstances than he had believed him to have fallen to. He provided him with a decent suit of clothes, promised him a passage to New York, and undertook to find him paying employment on the other side of the Atlantic. All these circumstances the watchful James White, who had by this time enlisted the services of a familiar from Rotherham, reported to Prickett as they transpired.

Another circumstance reported by the watchful White was the purchase by Gale of a belt purse of somewhat unusual dimensions, divided into compartments. This article had to be made to order, and was to be ready without fail on the afternoon of Reuben's arranged rendezvous with Wyncott Esden. The last item of information White sent to Prickett on this question was to the effect that the belt had been finished, and called for by Gale, who had taken it home with him.

Keen and experienced as he was, Gale was altogether out-manceuvred, and when he set out to the empty house with the stolen gems bound snugly about his body, and a small bag containing the simple necessities for his voyage in his

hand, he walked towards one of his captors whilst the other patiently dogged his footsteps.

It was nearly nine o'clock, and the shades of evening had fallen earlier than usual, for the sky was dense with cloud. An hour earlier a coppery tinge had been reflected upon the faces of all wayfarers from the threatening sky. Now the glow had faded, and the clouds hung dark and seemed to touch the house-tops. The sparse gas lamps glimmered here and there, revealing old hulks of timber, and the raw ends of houses from which their companions of many years had been newly rent away. Parts of the road were dangerous with open foundations, or difficult with mounds of building refuse, loose piles of brick and slate and rafters. Gale knew his way, and steered a steady course. The spy, wary and noiseless, followed in his rear.

The two were midway through the wilderness of wrecked houses when the threatened storm first broke. One or two heavy drops had given warning, when the whole sky opened into flame, and the thunder crashed with awful suddenness and nearness. The wind rose at once as if it had been held in a leash and set free at this loud signal, and the rain came down in a sheet. Gale bent his head and ran, and the watcher followed

heedless of his footsteps now that their noise was drowned by the roaring wind and rain.

The burglar made for a house which stood far back across a waste of rubbish heaps, and pushing open the door, stood for a moment to wipe the rain from his face. Then he mounted the darkened stair deliberately, with the sure foot of custom. Half-way up he paused and listened. There was a noise behind him.

‘Hillo!’ he said. ‘That you? You’re late.’

‘No, Reuben,’ answered an unexpected voice above him. ‘We’re full in time.’

A ray of light from a dark lantern flashed suddenly in his face and for the second half-blinded him. The following footstep mounted swiftly. The trapped villain thrust his hand into the pocket of the light dust-coat he wore, clutched a revolver there, and without waiting to withdraw it, fired through the cloth in the direction of the light above him. Then he turned, and seeing full in the line of light a grim visage straining swiftly up at him out of the lower dark, he fired again.

‘Look out, Jim!’ roared Prickett from above, and at the same instant he leaped from the landing, lighting full on Gale and falling with him. The thunder broke again at that very second of time, but a third shot from the revolver

was audible even then. The thunder rolled away and there was a dead silence.

‘Anybody hurt?’ said Prickett, picking himself up with difficulty from the landing.

‘I’m in two or three pieces somehow,’ White responded, ‘but the main part’s here seemin’ly. Upsey-daisy, governor! You’ve knocked *him* silent, master!’

‘Keep a hand on him,’ said Prickett. ‘He’s as wily as Satan and as strong as a lion. I dropped the glim before I jumped. I’ll get upstairs for it, and we’ll have a look at him. Jim, I’m blowed if I ain’t broke my arm. If you’ve got to hit that chap while I’m gone you hit him hard, my lad, and say I told you.’

‘He won’t want no hitting,’ White answered, as his superior crawled up the stairs. ‘Gaffer!’ he cried in a changed voice, ‘I can’t so much as feel him breathe.’

‘Look out for him if he’s foxing,’ Prickett called back. ‘Here’s this blessed lantern standing straight on end, and blazing away as if it knowed that it was wanted. That’s a bit o’ luck.’

He came down the stairs groaning and limping, and generally exaggerating his own mischances with a view to the temptation of the prisoner in case he should be shamming.

‘Better get the darbies on him while he’s

quiet, James. We shall have to do a bit o' searching, and it'll be all the easier if he comes to again.'

He flashed the light upon Gale's face, and with a quick cry knelt beside him. The burglar lay full length with one arm crumpled up behind him.

'He's paid all this time,' said Prickett, solemnly. 'He's as dead as a door nail. I jumped the very second he fired that last shot. I must ha' turned his hand and the ball's gone into him. Look here!'

The morning papers brought a new and dreadful fear to the three guests at Wootton Hill. Janet rose from the breakfast table with a cry, and Mrs. Wyncott and Edith hurried wildly after her as she ran from the room. She stood in the hall like a statue of misery, with the journal she had been reading clutched convulsively in both hands.

'There is blood upon them,' she cried. 'The man—one of the men—is killed.'

They brought her back to the room and tried to soothe her, but they knew nothing of her main fear. Elphinstone and Arnold alike understood it, when they in turn came to read the article which had so terrified and shocked her.

It was headed 'Desperate and Fatal Encounter with a Burglar,' and related the manner of the death of Reuben Gale, and the discovery upon his body of the jewels which had been stolen from Miss Pharr. Arnold and the Doctor held a hasty consultation on it, and the young clergyman rushed up to town at once to consult Prickett. That worthy personage was in bed with a broken arm, and was ordered to keep quiet for a day or two on guard against feverish symptoms.

'You needn't be alarmed, sir,' he said when Arnold explained his errand. 'Mr. Wyncott Esden's name doesn't come into this any more than yours does. There'll be an inquest, and I shall have to tell what happened at the time, but I shan't have to go outside it. I went to meet Gale "from information received." That's the form, and the coroner won't try to get behind it. If my chiefs ask me anything more about it I shall tell 'em again what I said last night. "There were two in it," says I, "but the other was a new hand, and he got conscience-struck, and came to me and split." You needn't have any fear at all; Mr. Wyncott Esden's name won't show.'

In the event it proved so. Wyncott Esden went out to New South Wales, and practised at

the bar. A year later Mary Grainger followed him, and they two were married. There are not many wives who have so terrible a knowledge of their husbands, but she uses hers as Wyncott uses his own knowledge of the past.

Speaking for myself, in spite of my knowledge of the whole story, I am not sure that I would not sooner trust Wyncott Esden at this hour than many men who have led fairly blameless lives. It does not happen to all of us to stand by as spectators of the earthquake which rives the soul, and to look into the awful abyss that opens there. He who has looked once, and has been mercifully saved from falling, desires to look no more. Happy they who have no need to be shaken over that appalling gulf. And happy likewise they who, having need of the terror, look once into its depths, and are set back on sound land again with wholesome lifelong fear implanted in their hearts.

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